

Position Statement



“Fracking” - Hydraulic Fracturing for Natural Gas

The Sierra Club Michigan Chapter supports a ban on fracking in Michigan and urges lawmakers to, at a minimum, strengthen safeguards for the protection of water, air and land from the impacts of fracking in all drilling operations.

Issue Background

Hydraulic fracturing is a controversial process for extracting natural gas and oil that puts Michigan’s fresh water at risk. There is clear evidence that fracking natural gas and oil contributes to climate disruption. Methane released via extraction and transport is 86 times more potent as a greenhouse gas than CO₂.

In the fracking process, millions of gallons of water, mixed with thousands of gallons of chemicals, are forcibly pumped down a well to blast open tight rock fissures to access natural gas or oil deposits. A similar process has been used for over 50 years in shallow wells, but recently, technological advances have made more extreme fracking possible and have dramatically increased the scale of its impact. This new fracking explores far deeper (down to 10,000 feet), then often drills horizontally another 2 miles, consequently using much larger quantities of water and chemicals. Each of these deeper fracking operations consumes from 3 to 35 million gallons of water from local watersheds and the Great Lakes basin. The specific mix of chemicals used is kept as a trade secret even though 29 of the chemicals are known carcinogens (cancer-causing).

Current statutes and Department of Environmental Quality regulations are inadequate for this new, more dangerous form of fracking and must be updated to protect our health, water, air, and the Great Lakes. The experience in states like Pennsylvania, where thousands of wells have been fracked with major environmental consequences, shows that regulations are not able to keep up with the pace and complexity of fracking.

The DEQ needs to stop issuing new permits for natural gas extraction using fracking.

Short of that, there are safeguards that could reduce (but not eliminate) some of the risks of fracking. These include:

- The oil and gas drilling exemption from Michigan’s water withdrawal law must end. The process and models for assessing water withdrawal impacts from fracking should be updated and revised to include cumulative impacts.
- Full public disclosure of all chemicals should be required before any fracking takes place. Claims of trade secrets should not be allowed to hide environmental and health risks.
- Comprehensive baseline testing of nearby ground and surface water sources must take place both prior to drilling and after well completion, using a long-term monitoring plan.
- Fracking fluids, drilling muds, and produced water must be properly treated, managed, and disposed of.
- The permitting process must include a public participation process, which currently does not exist in statute. This must include a comment period for permits and the right to request a public hearing.
- All wells, pipelines, and equipment must be regularly inspected, and seismic activity, and radioactivity in water as well as other water quality parameters, must be regularly monitored.
- Air pollution controls must be implemented, including: requiring use of idling limits; clean diesels, electric and alternative fueled vehicles; controlling flares and the venting of methane and VOCs; and best practices to control silica dust.
- Require public health monitoring and local emergency response plans for each site.
- Increase fracking operation setback distances from schools, hospitals, public parks, day-care facilities and residences to 1 mile from the edge of the well pad.

Current Legislation on Fracking in Michigan

There is currently no bill introduced to ban fracking in Michigan.

Sierra Club Supports the Following Bills

HB 4237 (Peter Lucido): Enable zoning regulation of drilling oil/gas wells for all townships and counties.

Sierra Club Opposes the Following Bills

HB 4260 (Michael Webber): Prohibit oil/gas wells within 1000 feet of a residential building in counties with a population higher than 750,000. Only protects 3 of Michigan's 83 counties (Wayne, Oakland, and Macomb).

HB 4303 (Brett Roberts): allow natural gas utilities to expand their infrastructure with Michigan Public Service Commission oversight/review and use ratepayer money to pay for it. This ratepayer money should instead be spent on repairing/replacing old natural gas pipelines, distributed generation, community renewable projects, or energy efficiency.

SB 438 (John Proos): sunset Michigan's Energy Optimization standard in 2019, repeal Michigan's Renewable Energy Standard, establish a definition for "clean energy" that includes polluting fossil fuels, implement a voluntary green pricing program, eliminate net metering, destroy the distributed energy market, and replace standards with an Integrated Resource Planning process.

Sierra Club Is Neutral on the Following Bills

HB 4469 (Kristy Pagan) and SB 277 (Hoon-Yung Hopgood): regulate radioactive fracking waste, also known as Technologically Enhanced Naturally Occurring Radioactive Material (TENORM). Allow TENORM disposal in landfills, require landfill owners test TENORM and report volume/radioactivity to the DEQ, limit landfills to accepting less than 2000 cubic meters of TENORM annually. The Sierra Club advocates for a bill that bans the disposal of TENORM in landfills or prevents landfills from accepting TENORM with more than 5 picocuries per gram of Radium 226 and 228.

HB 4794 (Peter Lucido): establish a study of best practices on oil/gas drilling in residential areas by the office of Technology, Management and Budget.