



Press release

Friday 3 March 2017

Federal Council adopts report on fracking

At its meeting on 3 March 2017, the Federal Council stated its position on the use of the subsurface by hydraulic fracturing (fracking). The application of the technology should in general be possible under certain conditions, in particular when associated with drillings to extract geothermal heat from great depths. However, the Federal Council does not support the development of natural gas reserves by hydraulic fracturing due to Switzerland's climate policy. At the same time, the Federal Council sees no reason for a moratorium.

In various political initiatives in recent years the Federal Council has been instructed to address the topic of hydraulic fracturing / fracking and to state its position. In his report "Fracking in Switzerland", the Federal Council has come to the conclusion that there is no reason to ban the technology, and that the existing legal framework at the federal level also covers the technology. However, the Federal Council endorses a uniform regulators practice in the cantons, who exert sovereignty over the utilization of the subsurface; a sovereignty that is exerted in a highly variable way.

The interdepartmental working group's report "Fracking in Switzerland" examines possible effects of this technology on humans and the environment. The hazards of hydraulic fracturing include triggering earthquakes, which might, for example damage infrastructure and buildings. Chemical additives, used for example to inhibit bacterial growth or decomposition of the fracking fluids, might contaminate ground and surface waters. Potential hazards include naturally occurring subsurface pollutants transported from large depths to surface, such as heavy metals, hydrocarbons or radioactive materials, as well as methane gas.

Principles defined

It is the opinion of the Federal Council that risks to humans and the environment, associated with drilling deep boreholes (with or without hydraulic fracturing) can be reduced to an acceptable level if existing environmental regulations are implemented correctly and if the principles defined in the report are applied (see text box). The Federal Council refrains from a moratorium on fracking, since existing legal regulations and the knowledge in relation to the

technology are adequate for possible projects. However, for reasons of climate policy, the use of fracking for the exploitation of fossil natural gas reserves is not supported.

Next steps

As a next step, DETEC (the Federal Department of the Environment, Transport, Energy and Communications) will examine whether the Environmental Impact Assessment Ordinance and other relevant legal bases (e.g. the Chemical Risk Reduction Ordinance) need to be amended when applied to drilling deep wells and hydraulic fracturing. Subsequently, the feasibility and need for the establishment of a central register will be examined. Information on substances and quantities used in deep wells and for hydraulic fracturing would be gathered in such a central register. Finally, cantons should standardize their regulatory practice for deep wells. The DETEC will develop the fundamentals, among them the principles for safe and environmentally compatible hydraulic fracturing.

Text box

Principles for hydraulically fractured, deep wells

- Fracking fluids must not contain any persistent substances hazardous to health or environment.
- All the substances and components used and their quantities must be declared.
- Fluids used must be safely stored, handled and subsequently disposed; likewise flowback as well as muds after the hydraulic fracturing.
- With regard to the construction, operation and decommissioning of infrastructures, operations must be in compliance with stringent safety standards among others, in relation to soil and water contamination and greenhouse gas emissions.
- Hydraulic fracturing operations are subject to an integral risk management approach (covering the entire project life cycle).
- To adequately analyse risks, knowledge of the subsurface condition must be extended, if needed.
- The 'polluter pays' principle applies, with clearly defined responsibilities.

Information

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Annexes

- Fracking in der Schweiz [Fracking in Switzerland]: Federal Council report in fulfilment of the Trede Postulate 13.3108 of 19 March 2013

The internet

- SFOE (Swiss Federal Office of Energy): Energiestrategie 2050 [Energy Strategy 2050]
<http://www.bfe.admin.ch/energiestrategie2050/index.html?lang=en>
- SFOE (Swiss Federal Office of Energy): Geothermal energy
<http://www.bfe.admin.ch/themen/00490/00501/index.html?lang=en>
- FOEN: Groundwater protection
<https://www.bafu.admin.ch/bafu/de/home/themen/wasser/fachinformationen/massnahmen-zum-schutz-der-gewaesser/grundwasserschutz.html> (in german, french, italian)
- SCNAT (Swiss Academy of Sciences): Fracking

Press release

<http://www.naturwissenschaften.ch/service/publications/76344-eine-technik-im-fokus-fracking-langfassung-> (in german only)

- Basic report of the interdepartmental working group Fracking in Switzerland
Link: www.bafu.admin.ch/fracking (in german and french)

Responsible Department:

DETEC