

Quit dragging feet on fracking

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Oil field workers drill in February into the Gypsum Hills near Medicine Lodge, Kan., using horizontal drilling and a technique known as hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, to coax out oil and gas. | Orlin Wagner~AP

It's time to get cracking on fracking in Illinois.

For three long years, environmentalists and fracking industry representatives negotiated the rules for fracking, a game-changing new way of extracting oil and natural gas, in Illinois. Their work is reflected in a June 2013 law that Gov. Pat Quinn boasted includes the best environmental protections in the nation.

But then nothing happened.

For more than another year, with a slowness that caused skeptics to question the state's commitment to fracking, further rules and regulations were hashed out at the administrative level.

Finally last week, the Illinois Department of Natural Resources released a 150-page second draft of rules for fracking, which would seem like good news. But we hear early rumblings that some of those involved in the original negotiations, particularly on the industry side, think this latest rules draft falls short of the carefully calibrated compromise Quinn signed into law. It now falls to a little-known panel of 16 state legislators, the Joint Committee on Administrative Rules, to resolve those concerns by a Nov. 15 deadline.

Please, people, let's get this done. Fracking, when done right, is good for the country and good for Illinois — and other states are zooming ahead. The danger, if the deadline is not met, is that the agreement might have to be renegotiated from scratch, creating a delay of at least another six months.

If you, like many Americans, were driving around on the Labor Day weekend, you probably noticed that

gasoline prices were a lot lower than we have usually experienced when a new wave of unrest threatens Mideast petroleum supplies.

Those lower prices are at least in part due to fracking, a new blend of older technologies that is rapidly turning the United States into a net oil exporter and maybe even the world's top oil producer by the end of the decade.

With its large New Albany shale formation Downstate, Illinois has a chance to join other states that are reaping sizable tax revenues from fracking, which uses water, chemicals and sand to extract oil and natural gas by cracking open deep rock formations. Illinois' cash-starved budget could use the boost. Illinois also could use the jobs.

The danger of fracking is that it can contaminate local water supplies or simply use up so much water that there's not enough left for other purposes. Fracking also can leave behind detrimental chemicals, and the drilling process can generate noise, dust, fumes and air pollution.

Fracking is less a long-term solution to our nation's energy needs, then, than a way to buy time while we ramp up production from renewable energy sources.

Because it perpetuates the burning of fossil fuels that release greenhouse gases, fracking contributes to climate change. The National Climate Assessment reported in May that the United States already is getting more intense rain and snowstorms because of climate change. A study published Tuesday in the journal Nature Communications says climate change also will bring repeats of the polar vortex that made last winter in Chicago so miserable.

We would all be wise to join the fight against climate change. But a stronger Illinois economy is essential as well.

Let's get fracking.

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