Crossing shale's fault lines

Americans may not know it, but other countries with shale deposits of gas or oil now look to the United States for leadership on two fronts:

One, how to best use the techniques of horizontal drilling and hydraulic fracturing (“fracking”).

And two, how to resolve competing values involved in even tapping this abundant source of petroleum.

In large part because of fracking, the US is now on course to become the world’s largest producer of oil and natural gas, creating jobs in many areas and a hope of energy security for the nation. But the US has only begun the task of finding a consensus on whether fracking’s hazards outweigh its benefits and what to do about those hazards, such as methane release and water pollution.

(See related commentary, page 35.)

Both sides in the debate have long armed themselves with studies, polls, pressure groups, and even movies to promote or prohibit fracking. Local citizens living over shale formations are often at a loss, perhaps fearing potential ill health effects while eyeing potential wealth.

But some courageous individuals in the energy industry and environmental camps have reached out with respect and dispassion to listen to each other in hopes of finding a fact-based consensus.

**Voluntary certification**

Last spring, for example, a coalition of gas developers, green activists, and foundations started the Center for Sustainable Shale Development. The nonprofit center now certifies fracking companies that implement high standards for protecting air quality, water resources, and the climate. Its aim is to imitate the voluntary certification for green buildings known as Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design, or LEED.

Another example is a law passed last month in California that strikes a middle ground in both allowing and regulating fracking. With the state’s Monterey Shale formation perhaps able to produce 15.4 billion barrels of oil, Gov. Jerry Brown (D) backed the measure and has decided to take a moderate approach by balancing contending interests.

Only two years ago, California passed a law requiring the state to be using 33 percent renewable energy by 2020. In now setting up a favorable scheme for shale production, it is showing how to have a healthy debate over the rational management of both a productive resource and the environment.

The wide differences in tapping shale, depending on geological structures and water resources, almost dictate that effective regulation - or an outright ban, as New York has done - be driven by localities and states. The quality of those debates - a dialogue among listeners rather than a Washington-style power clash - could serve as a model for other countries as they decide whether to tap this resource.

**Needed: unbiased research**

In August, another consensus-seeking group, the Shale Gas Roundtable, issued a 139-page report with a number of recommendations. One of its strongest suggestions is to set up a fund for independent research on shale exploitation. Too many studies are paid for by the industry or environmental groups, leading to a perceived bias in much of the data.

Trust is a prerequisite for resolving shale’s many challenges, including the role of natural gas as a “transition” fuel to a green-energy economy.

The past year has seen the US make great progress in settling the future for shale fuels. Other nations are watching, eager to see how the US deliberates the value of shale in both its possible harms and expected benefits.