

EDITORIAL

On the frack front

Encouraging study group report brings challenges and surprises.

WE'VE long favored a methodical, science-based process to examine the pros and cons of hydraulic fracturing, the technology that offers the potential of opening up vast domestic reserves of natural gas trapped in huge shale formations in Texas and elsewhere across the nation.

Week before last brought release of a much-anticipated report by Secretary of Energy Steven Chu's Shale Gas Advisory Board, which features a mixed bag of opportunities and challenges for the energy industry — as well as its share of surprises. The Chronicle's Tom Fowler reported the results ("Fracturing report looks at wells and emissions," Page D1, Aug. 11).

The report drew quick criticism from both industry representatives and environmental advocates — which may well be an indication that this is a balanced, objective piece of work.

The industry should be heartened by the board's finding that the fracking process isn't inherently threatening to water supplies. On the other hand, the findings about the impact of poor well construction and older wells are troubling. It's likely these have contaminated aquifers, and air emissions must be better controlled, according to the experts, led by former CIA chief John Deutch, now a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

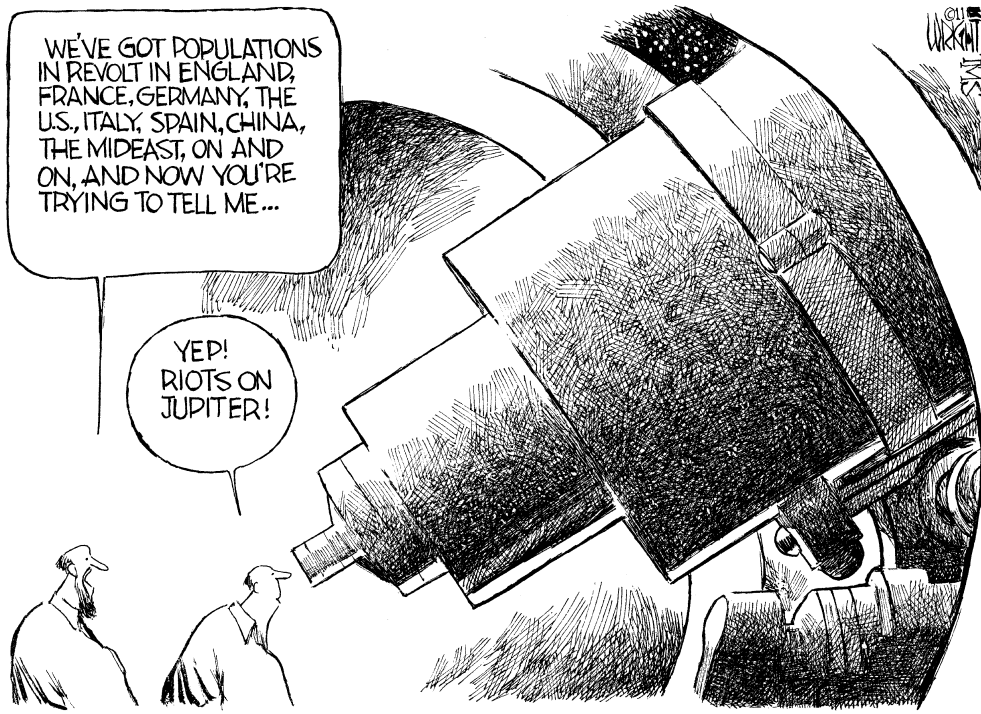
Perhaps most surprising was the group's conclusion that the risks to water supplies thought to be posed by chemicals used in fracking are less than those to air quality.

"When we started, the mantra we were following was to look at the hydraulic fracturing and the chemicals going into the ground," said Stephen Holditch, head of Texas A&M's Petroleum Engineering Department. "But it turns out it was almost a non-issue."

But air quality is a different matter, the study found: Cumulative impact on air could be significant and requires close attention.

We concur. There is great hope and promise in the domestic shale gas resources that can be accessed by hydraulic fracturing. But that process must be carried out with the utmost care for the environment.

Secretary Chu's Shale Gas Advisory Board has raised important issues that should be treated seriously by the energy industry.



Depressing start to the school year

Texas fares poorly on child well-being scale

By RACHEL TOLBERT KIMBRO

TODAY marks the first day of school for more than 200,000 children in the Houston Independent School District. Although our children are enjoying a fresh start, recent state budget cuts and looming federal budget cuts threaten this sense of optimism.

On average, more than one-quarter of the children in a Texas public school classroom live under the federal poverty line — about \$22,000 per year for a family of four in 2011. But the federal poverty line is outdated, and families need much more just to meet basic needs. Nationwide, fully 42 percent of children live in low-income households — households with incomes less than twice the federal poverty line. In Houston, rates are far worse. According to the Center for Public Policy Priorities (CPPP) and the Annie E. Casey Foundation's KIDS COUNT Data Center, 53 percent of Houston children with U.S.-born parents live in low-income families, as do fully 68 percent of children with foreign-born parents.

In addition, the Texans Care for Children organization notes that Texas ranks dead last among U.S. states in many indicators of child well-being — including food insecurity (children experiencing

hunger), access to adequate housing and the proportion of children without health insurance. Food insecurity and economic instability are so bad in Texas that huge backlogs in paperwork for food stamps delayed benefits for tens of thousands of families well beyond the federally mandated time of 30 days to determine eligibility.

The massive cuts to public education approved last spring in Austin also will have long-lasting and devastating consequences for the children of our state. CPPP estimates that Texas schools must manage cuts, on average, of nearly \$1,000 per student just when the needs of our students are increasing. Although earlier this month HISD restored some funding to schools that had been previously cut, the severity of the reductions mandated by the Legislature won't come to fruition for another year or longer. It is clear that dark times are ahead for the hard-working employees and families of Texas schools.

Gov. Rick Perry, who is now running for president, is extolling the increase in jobs in Texas during his administration on the national news. Perhaps the low

regulations and low taxes in Texas are beneficial to job creation. But Texans need to ask ourselves: At what cost? Fully 37 percent of the jobs Texas added last year paid at or below minimum wage; we now lead the nation in the number of minimum-wage workers. Are these low-paying jobs — while better than no jobs

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— really enough for our state, given the reality that so many of our children lack access to sufficient food, health care and adequate housing?

Texas' economic situation may look relatively strong at first glance, but even the most cursory glance under the hood should give citizens and policymakers a lot to worry about. As your child or grandchild starts school today, ask yourself if you want them growing up in a state that ranks dead last on so many indicators of child well-being. Where are our priorities, Texas?

Kimbrow is a Rice Scholar at the James A. Baker III Institute for Public Policy at Rice University. She is also an assistant professor of sociology and the director of the Urban Health Program at the Kinder Institute for Urban Research.

World needs big steps to avoid slide

E.J. DIONNE JR. says the president should work with other leaders to take immediate steps to boost the global economy.

WASHINGTON — President Obama has only one option as he ponders a world economy teetering on the edge: He needs to go big, go long and go global.

Obama should not be constrained by what the tea party might allow subservient Republican leaders in Congress to do. He should state plainly, eloquently and in detail what he thinks needs to happen. Neither history nor the voters will be kind to him if he lets caution and political calculation get in the way.

Going big means immediate action to boost the economy, even though this will increase the short-term deficit. His proposals to continue the payroll tax cut, extend unemployment insurance and enact patent reform are good, but not enough.

The federal government needs to come to the aid of state and local governments again; the budget cuts they are being forced to make are precisely what the economy does not need now. We must find ways of boosting spending as quickly as possible on roads, bridges, transit and other building projects, including a new program to rehabilitate the nation's dilapidated schools. And the administration needs to do far more to resolve the mortgage mess, which is holding back consumers.

Over the last week, big investors and business leaders have largely stopped talking about budget balancing and started issuing panicky calls for the world's governments to step up to the challenge of avoiding a second recession by spending more money. They know that austerity is the wrong medicine right now.

Note well: It's not only liberals in the United States and social democrats in Europe who are pushing to stimulate the economy. Calls to do so are also coming from the heart of the capitalist system.

At the same time, Obama should put forward a plan of his own to close the long-term deficit. He should not be hemmed in by his negotiations with congressional Republicans to get the debt ceiling raised. They don't hold the nation's credit hostage anymore. He should lay out exactly what he would do and abandon his practice of making pre-emptive concessions to his opponents.

That means Obama should not be shy about urging eventual tax increases, particularly on the wealthy. And let's be clear: these would not be immediate tax hikes; they'd kick in a year or two from now. Any plausible plan should include at least \$2 trillion to \$2.5 trillion in new revenues over a decade.

Obama, who loves to quote financier Warren Buffett, should follow Buffett's lead on this. Writing in The New York Times last week, Buffet proposed that "for those making more than \$1 million — there were 236,883 such households in 2009 — I would raise rates immediately on taxable income in excess of \$1 million, including, of course, dividends and capital gains. And for those who make \$10 million or more — there were 8,274 in 2009 — I would suggest an ad-

ditional increase in rate."

"My friends and I," he added, "have been coddled long enough by a billionaire-friendly Congress." Buffett, bless him, puts the lie to the foolish idea that we need fewer tax rates, which pamper the very wealthy by taxing them at the same rates as the upper middle class. We need additional tax rates for the truly rich.

A carbon tax, partly offset by tax cuts or rebates for middle income and poorer taxpayers, could provide additional revenue. And we need to do still more to contain health care costs without hurting those who can't afford insurance, and without voucherizing Medicare.

But our problems are not all made-in-America. This is a global problem requiring a global solution. Europe's debt mess and its weird political structure — a common currency without an effective common government — helped trigger the near-panic we're in. Even China's growth rate shows signs of slowing.

World leaders came together in 2009 and stopped the slide toward depression. Obama should take the lead in bringing them together to act in concert again.

Ah, but won't congressional Republicans block as much of this program as they can? That's the wrong question. The point is to insist on a rational plan and to challenge the political system to act rationally. Most economists and business people not blinded by ideology believe we need short-term stimulus and long-term fiscal balance. Obama should explain what needs to be done and then fight for it.

It's the only way it will have any chance of happening.

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LETTERS

College football

REGARDING "Football rivalries in Texas are worthy of protection" (Page B9, Thursday), Mark White is correct, the decisions that were made to dissolve the Southwest Conference in the 1990s benefited those universities that moved on to create the Big 12. But the remaining schools that were left out — University of Houston, Southern Methodist University, Texas Christian University and Rice — struggled for years and suffered irreparable damage and losses of revenue that have never been recovered.

The question is: Where was the outcry then, and

where is it now? I would have a little more sympathy for White's case if those schools that left would at least play the schools left behind every once in a while.

It is interesting to note that even today Texas A&M and Texas, schools that are 100 or so miles from Houston, will not play the University of Houston. This year, both Texas and A&M play eight colleges that are not in the state of Texas. More than half of their schedule is with schools that are out of state. The same applies to Houston, but the difference is that Houston would love to play the Texas schools; A&M has decided they would rather not. So the question I ask is: How can A&M complain about Texas having an advantage with recruiting because of the Texas Network when their actions are contrary to fair play?

All the old SWC schools are great schools. We in Texas should be proud of the education one can receive here. However, the pride White talks about is not something I feel when I talk about the football rivalries. It's hard to admire the players playing among themselves in the country club when you are on the public course and know your game is just as good.

— DON MENDEL, Richmond

Astros lament

REGARDING "Pence trade leaves Astros starless" (Page A1, July 30), I've been an Astros fan since the days of the Colt 45s, and I believe Astros management made a bad deal.

How can they trade away a young, proven ball player and their only All-Star for four unproven Class A and Class AA players? This does not make sense.

The Astros could have built their team around Hunter Pence and Michael Bourn, who are proven ballplayers. The Astros not only traded away Pence, they also traded away their fans. I predict the results will show up the rest of this season and next year, when the attendance will be suffering.

— WILBURN W. NEUTZLER, Brenham

Texas and growth

REGARDING "Water needs of future have stalled since '97" (Page B1, Friday), the article assumes that growth of the population in Texas is inevitable, and that population growth is positive. No one seems to be addressing what, in my opinion, is an equally important question. What would be the benefit to Texas and its residents if we do not increase our water supply? A question that also needs to be considered is whether it would be in the overall interest of Texans to stop and rescind population growth. Population growth is not inevitable. If we put barriers in the way, such as a limited water supply, perhaps Texas will level off at a sustainable and reasonable population size.

I do recall the sustained drought of the 1950s very well. We managed, and we did not take our water supply for granted as so many seem to do today. Of course, the population in Texas would not have grown without Lyndon Johnson's plan to build reservoirs in Texas. At the same time, I doubt that he envisioned his plan resulting in uncontrolled growth that would undermine the very essence of Texas culture.

Let's examine exactly who would benefit if massive bonds for water projects are approved. Let's examine whether more population growth is really in the best interest of the next generation of Texans.

— RAYMOND H.C. TESKE JR., Huntsville

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BIBLE VERSE

He sent his word, and healed them, and delivered them from their destructions.

— PSALM 107:20