

# Raising the bar on gas debate

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New Brunswick's Minister of Energy and Mines, Craig Leonard, delivered what may be one of the landmark policy documents of the Alward government last week, in the form of a speech to the Saint John Board of Trade.

In it, he articulated clearly, rationally and with factual support why the government believes this province should proceed with an expansion of the shale-gas industry; why Conservatives believe the environmental record of the gas extraction industry holds up well under scrutiny; what New Brunswickers can expect to gain by permitting further development; and how the province's First Nations stand in the front rank of those who will benefit.

We don't expect the minister's remarks to settle this polarizing debate, but we do believe his openness and precision require a greater degree of precision and engagement from those who believe New Brunswick should choose a different economic path.

New Brunswickers can now see why the Alward government is determined to proceed with shale gas development. In the government's view, what is at stake is not simply the possibility of developing a domestic gas industry, but how that industry will resolve a looming shortage of natural gas needed to fuel existing industries and foster new economic development.

The spin-off benefits include expanded potash and fertilizer production, expanded crude oil processing and LNG exports. Minister Leonard has stated that the net economic benefits of shale gas could include up to \$2 billion in royalties and \$18 billion in economic activity over a 20-year period. And, while he did not dismiss the strength of public concerns about safety, he did refer pointedly to the perfect safety record of New Brunswick's 30 producing gas wells, all of which have been fracked, in addition to the record of the industry in Western Canada and a Canadian geological survey report that showed absolutely no contamination of water from fracked gas wells in New Brunswick's McCully gas field.

We still believe the provincial government needs to verify how much gas exists - a determination that can only be made by allowing further seismic exploration - and determine whether shale gas can be extracted safely in large quantities in New Brunswick, given the local geology and ecology of this province's gas fields.

It is becoming increasingly clear, however, that critics of the industry need to deal with the reality of what fracking is and would be in New Brunswick, not what it has been in Pennsylvania or Texas

or Arkansas.

What are the concerns here? What is the data here?

Policy debate in the legislature must be guided by factual answers to these questions. Emotional or anecdotal answers are no answers at all.

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The government is correct in proceeding with the development of natural gas but is not doing enough to explain it to the people and are letting irresponsible opponents circulating false information without contradicting them.

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