New Documentary Targets Critics of Fracking

KEVIN BEGOS, Associated Press

PITTSBURGH (AP) — "FrackNation" is a new documentary that attacks opponents of fracking for oil and gas, but it also raises a bigger question: Is it possible to criticize environmentalists without being a tool for big industry?

Fracking is a method of stimulating oil and gas from deep underground that's led to a historic boom in U.S. production while also stoking controversy over its possible impact on the environment and human health. "FrackNation," an independent documentary produced by Los Angeles-based filmmakers Phelim McAleer and Ann McElhinney, addresses the issue from an unusual perspective.

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EDITOR'S NOTE — The author, Kevin Begos, covers the fracking industry in Pennsylvania for The Associated Press. With "FrackNation" opening Tuesday, he offers this view from the ground.

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The release of the documentary now is clearly an attempt to play off a current Hollywood film on fracking, "Promised Land," which stars Matt Damon. But the David vs. Goliath roles are turned upside down, since McAleer's pro-fracking production received thousands of small donations on the fundraising site Kickstarter, while Damon's film, which has an anti-fracking angle, had millions of dollars in funding, including some from the United Arab Emirates.

McAleer says anti-fracking activists have based their crusade on faulty claims and a disdain for the actual wishes of many people in the rural communities where land is drilled. His main target is Josh Fox, the director of "Gasland," the 2010 award-winning, anti-drilling documentary that has inspired many critics of fracking.

One leading environmentalist welcomed "FrackNation's" take and said he can't wait to see it.

"It's great this guy's done this documentary. I think it's sort of a second wave to the more hysterical first reaction" to fracking, said Michael Shellenberger, president of the Breakthrough Institute, a Berkeley, Calif., nonprofit that argues for new ways to address environmental problems.

Like a genial Michael Moore with an Irish accent, McAleer narrates his confrontations with fracking opponents. Though some of McAleer's questions are simplistic and leading, it's startling to see how some critics of fracking react.

Fox, himself a journalist, dodges McAleer's questions, hangs up on him and even

uses his lawyers to try to have trailers for "FrackNation" removed from YouTube and Vimeo.

Fox said in a statement that he's refused to deal with McAleer "because he has persistently harassed Josh Fox and represented his statements in a false light." Fox also said McAleer has a long history of baiting environmentalists, denying climate change and spreading misinformation.

In eastern Pennsylvania, a landowner involved in a lawsuit against gas drilling companies confronts McAleer on a public highway, threatens to sue him, says she has a license to carry a pistol and calls 911. A police officer arrives and determines that McAleer has done nothing wrong.

Shellenberger, who hasn't seen the film yet, said it's interesting that McAleer used low-budget counterculture tactics to make a pro-drilling argument. He welcomed the fact that "FrackNation" also presents the views of numerous people in rural areas who say gas drilling is a benefit, not a curse.

For example, Montrose, Pa., farmer Ron White and his son say the royalties from drilling have helped keep the family farm in business, and that his water and land haven't been harmed by a nearby gas well.

McAleer also shows a respected cancer researcher some of Fox's claims that the chemicals used in fracking will cause cancer.

"If people say fracking is causing cancer, they don't know what they're talking about," University of California at Berkeley scientist Bruce Ames replies, noting that cabbage and broccoli also contain minute portions of chemicals that could technically be called carcinogens.

In strictly visual terms, FrackNation also quietly makes a point by showing that most of the Pennsylvania countryside in drilling areas is still beautiful, and not a wasteland. Though drilling is an industrial process, the iconic wells and fleets of noisy trucks that service the process disappear from a drilling pad after a few weeks or months.

But though "FrackNation" discredits some of the most extreme anti-fracking rhetoric, it also sometimes goes too far in dismissing legitimate concerns. For example, in tiny Dimock, Pa., where drinking water wells were tainted with methane, McAleer leaves viewers with the impression that drilling never caused problems for about a dozen families.

In fact, state environmental regulators determined that a drilling company contaminated the aquifer underneath homes there with explosive levels of methane and issued huge fines. The state later determined the company had fixed the problems, and most of the families reportedly reached an out-of-court settlement.

"FrackNation" also doesn't acknowledge that Texas regulators say there were some problems with leaking gas and air quality in the early days of the boom there, and

The Associated Press recently found that federal officials did have evidence that gas drilling may have contaminated some water wells in that region.

On such points, "FrackNation" is guilty of some of the same sins of exaggeration that it criticizes Fox for.

Yet Shellenberger said anti-fracking critics such as Fox and advocates such as McAleer may both be necessary.

"The radicals often play an important role in these environmental conflicts, to hold regulators' feet to the fire, to motivate industry. I think the radicals have played a positive role — but it can go too far," Shellenberger said, while adding that the presumption that environmentalists are all "on the side of all things good" is too simplistic.

McAleer, a journalist and filmmaker who previously covered the IRA for England's Sunday Times and other papers, said the Kickstarter campaign didn't accept money from oil and gas companies or their top executives. But critics have noted that one of his previous films attacked Al Gore and global warming, while another touted the benefits of a mine in a poor region of Romania.

"FrackNation" is scheduled to air Jan. 22 on cable channel AXS.

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Online: "FrackNation": www.fracknation.com *[1]*

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