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About the only time you'll see a group of 50 or more out-of-towners in Los Alamos is for some kind of special event, usually on a beautiful Central Coast weekend.

But just such a group defied the odds and came to the little hamlet Monday night for a discussion about hydraulic fracturing, more commonly known as fracking, the extraction method used by oil companies to get at hard-to-reach deposits deep underground.

The meeting was called by county and Los Alamos officials to talk about a nearby fracking project. The attendees seemed mostly skeptical of the practice, even though it has been used by the industry since the 1940s, but not so much here in California.

There's a good reason for that, several good reasons, actually. And when the Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors takes up this issue at its Aug. 2 meeting, there are significant factors to consider.

Fracking involves pumping pressurized liquid into a well to force cracks in surrounding rock formations, thus allowing oil to be released at a faster rate than would have been possible without blowing apart the rock formation.

Obviously, this process very much favors oil drillers. In the oil industry, as in so many others, time is money, and if oil can be sucked out from deep below the surface at a faster rate, the company has a greater chance of profiting.

But like so much that is related to the oil industry, what's good for a drilling company may not be so good for the environment, and especially for humans living near the fracking operation.
Among the problems is that fracking and the chemicals used in it are virtually unregulated in California. There is state and federal legislation in the works to force disclosure of which chemicals are used, but those laws are only pending.

Another issue to consider is that fracking is potentially risky business in regions with extensive seismic fault lines. We probably qualify on that one.

As one 30-year industry veteran recently explained, fracking is essentially "exploding a bomb" underground. Such a blast has to be strong enough to shatter rock, so it's anyone's guess what that kind of explosion might do to an active fault line.

Then there is the issue of aquifers, which are permeable or porous rock formations, and usually in the general vicinity of oil and gas deposits. If drillers are exploding rock formations, and forcing in what one critic calls an "unknown cocktail of toxic chemicals," what happens to the drinking water supply? That question was raised at Monday night's meeting, without being answered.

A congressional inquiry last year revealed that 14 of the industry's most active fracking companies have pumped millions of gallons of liquids into wellbores. More than 11 million gallons were found to have contained at least one of a group of toxic chemicals that included benzene, toluene, zylene and ethylbenzene.

The depth of the fracked wells makes it unlikely that such chemicals leaked into surrounding aquifers — but no one really knows, for sure.

Our intention here is not to skewer the oil industry, but to ask our police makers, from the local to the federal level, to carefully consider every aspect of the fracking debate. At the very least, public safety, health and welfare dictates that the rules require companies to disclose what chemicals are being pumped into the ground, and in what quantity.

While they're at it, county officials might also ask for legally binding assurances from the oil industry that it will be responsible for cleaning up any resulting mess.

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