

The Guardian



Top climate scientist blasts UK's fracking plans as 'aping Trump'

James Hansen, 'father of climate science', accuses Britain of ignoring science

Matthew Taylor *Environment correspondent*

Sat 13 Oct 2018 07:55 EDT

One of the world's leading climate scientists has launched a scathing attack on the government's fracking programme, accusing ministers of aping Donald Trump and ignoring scientific evidence.

James Hansen, who is known as the father of climate science, warned that future generations would judge the decision to back a UK fracking industry harshly.

"So the UK joins Trump, ignores science... full throttle ahead with the worst fossil fuels," Hansen told the *Observer*. "The science is crystal clear, we need to phase out fossil fuels starting with the most damaging, the 'unconventional' fossil fuels such as tar sands and 'fracking'."

Hansen has also written to the UK energy minister, Claire Perry, to underline his objections, warning that the decision was a serious policy error that would contribute to “climate breakdown”.

His intervention came as the first fracking operation in England for seven years - which had been due to get under way on Saturday in Lancashire - was postponed until Monday because of bad weather.

It also followed the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) report last week that warned the world has only 12 years left to avoid catastrophic climate change, calling on governments to take radical and far-reaching measures to decarbonise their economies.

Last week it emerged that Perry was considering relaxing rules on the earthquake limits on fracking, making it easier for companies to push ahead at sites in England.

But in his letter Hansen warned that young people could inherit an environment “out of their control” if fracking was pursued. “If the UK were to join the US by developing gas fields at this point in time it will lock in the methane problem for decades,” he wrote, adding that fracking would fatally undermine the UK’s attempt to fulfil its climate obligations.

“The fossil fuel companies are well aware methane is a potent greenhouse gas, and yet they seem willing to continue on a path which can have disastrous consequences for our grandchildren,” Hansen said.

The Conservative party’s fracking programme - which aims to release fossil fuel gas from wells at sites across England - has been dogged by criticism from environmentalists as well as fierce local opposition. There is a moratorium on the practice in Scotland and Wales.



Protesters stand outside Cuadrilla's Preston New Road fracking site near Blackpool, yesterday. Photograph: Andrew Yates/Reuters

Last month three environmental activists were jailed for their part in a direct action campaign at the Preston New Road fracking site near Blackpool in Lancashire.

The Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), which obtained a copy of Hansen’s letter, said it was “imperative that the government heeds the advice, concerns and warnings of leading scientists over fracking”.

“The severity of the warnings from the IPCC report underline why fracking is a dead duck,” said Tom Fyans, director of campaigns and policy at the CPRE. “We must speed up the transition to renewable energy - we have absolutely no time to mess around introducing a new carbon-emitting fossil fuel industry.”

The Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy defended its support of the controversial energy source. “Shale gas has the potential to be a new domestic energy source, enhancing our energy security and delivering economic benefits, including the creation of well-paid, quality jobs,” it said in a statement, adding it would respond to Hansen’s letter “in due course”.

It pointed out that the UK’s Committee on Climate Change “recognises that natural gas can help the UK meet its 2050 carbon emissions reduction target” and that since 1990 the UK has “cut emissions by more than 40% while growing our economy by more than two thirds; a feat unmatched by other G7 countries”.

However there is growing disquiet in Tory ranks about the government’s fracking plans. Almost two dozen Conservative MPs are reported to be opposed to fracking and willing to “destroy the government’s majority” if ministers seek to push proposals to relax rules through parliament.

Fyans said it was essential that the government listen to the “views and concerns of communities who will see their local environment industrialised” if fracking goes ahead.

“The current proposals to fast-track fracking through the planning system, which the government are consulting on, will take local people’s voices out of the discussion,” he said. “Whether or not you agree with fracking, it is a fundamental democratic right for people to be able to voice their concerns - we cannot deny communities this opportunity.”

The pressure is also building from the scientific community. The IPCC report called on governments to take radical action to decarbonise their economies. And in his letter Hansen warned that any politicians or officials who push ahead with fracking would bear “disproportionate responsibility” for the consequences.

“I urgently call upon politicians of any persuasion to reflect on the peer-reviewed scientific information that is readily available and which clearly points to the need to rapidly phase down fossil emissions,” he wrote. “A task made much more difficult and probably implausible if the world exacerbates the problem by expanding fossil fuel emissions via fracking technology.”

Since you’re here...

... we have a small favour to ask. More people are reading the Guardian than ever, but advertising revenues across the media are falling fast. And unlike many news organisations, we haven’t put up a paywall - we want to keep our journalism as open as we can. So you can see why we need to ask for your help.

The Guardian is editorially independent. So we set our own agenda. Our journalism is free from commercial bias. It isn’t influenced by billionaire owners, politicians or shareholders. No one edits our Editor. No one steers our opinion. This means we can give a voice to the voiceless. It lets us challenge the powerful - and hold them to account. And at a time when factual, honest reporting is critical, it’s what sets us apart from so many others.

The Guardian's long term sustainability relies on the support that we receive directly from our readers. And we would like to thank the hundreds of thousands who are helping to secure our future. But we cannot stop here. As more of you offer your ongoing support, we can keep investing in quality investigative journalism and analysis. We can remain a strong, progressive force that is open to all.

If everyone who reads our reporting, who likes it, helps to support it, our future would be much more secure. **For as little as \$1, you can support the Guardian - and it only takes a minute. Thank you.**

Support The Guardian



Topics

- Fracking
- The Observer
- James Hansen
- Gas
- Energy
- Fossil fuels
- Climate change (Science)
- news