

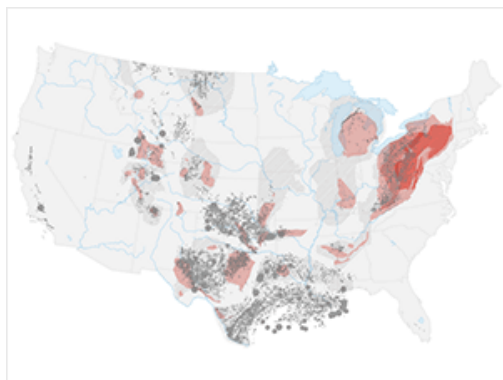
With Little Clout, Natural Gas Lobby Strikes Out

by PETER OVERBY

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text size **A A A**

Last in a three-part series



Natural Gas: Traditional Drilling Areas And Shale Basins

There is almost a century's worth of natural gas in shale rock formations all over the country, enough to make a significant change in the debate about America's energy future. But as Congress moves toward writing a new national energy policy, natural-gas lobbyists have been mostly missing in action.

"Natural gas is the cleanest of the fossil fuels," says Christopher Flavin, president of the Worldwatch Institute, a think tank that does environmental research. "I think nobody's ever argued that. The big thing, of course, that's changed is that shale gas has now opened up as this enormous resource."

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Natural gas emits half the carbon of coal. Flavin and some other top environmentalists want Congress to embrace natural gas as a transition fuel, to move the country away from coal and toward clean fuels that haven't yet come on the market.

A Changing Landscape?

"I'm actually hopeful that we will see a change in the whole landscape of the politics around natural gas as a result," Flavin says.

But the change hasn't come yet on Capitol Hill. When the House passed its climate-change bill in June, the big winner was coal. The measure — called Waxman-Markey for its two lead sponsors, Reps. Henry Waxman (D-CA) and Edward Markey (D-MA) — would give electric utilities longer deadlines to keep burning coal, and would commit millions of federal dollars to research new technologies that would reduce coal's carbon emissions.

Waxman-Markey had no such incentives for natural gas, and those in the industry are frustrated. That's because about a century's worth of natural gas is available in [shale formations](#) all over the country.

"I know I had many conversations with representatives, trying to tell the natural gas story," says Steven Malcolm, CEO of Williams Companies, a big independent producer of natural gas. "I don't know why we didn't fare better. I heard one representative say there wasn't a critical mass of natural gas represented."

Soon after Waxman-Markey passed, leaders of the natural gas industry met at an annual conference in Denver — where former Sen. Tim Wirth chewed them out.

Wirth used to represent Colorado and has long been an advocate of natural gas. Since 1998, he has been president of the United Nations Foundation, a nonprofit organization that works on climate change.

Wirth told the industry leaders that on Waxman-Markey, they blew it. "Every industry was deeply engaged, except one: Yours," he said. "The natural gas industry, the industry

More About The Quest For Shale

[Modern Shale Gas Development In The United States: A Primer](#)

by the U.S. Department of Energy (PDF)

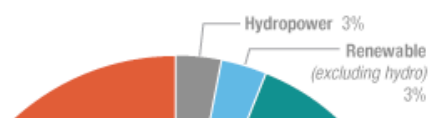
The [American Clean Skies Foundation](#) is a nonprofit devoted to educating the public about natural gas and its relation to renewable energy and energy efficiency.

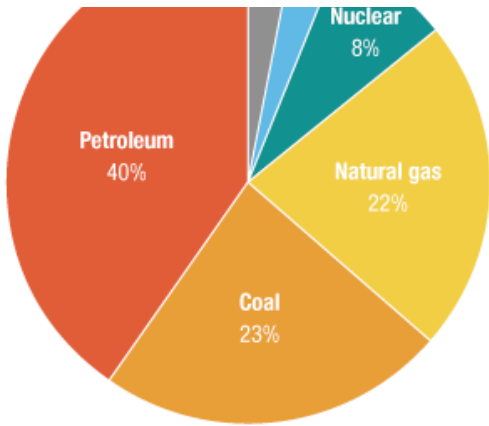
The [Ground Water Protection Council](#) monitors regulation of natural gas drilling and production in the U.S.

[Worldwatch Institute](#), an independent research group based in Washington, D.C., conducts research about energy and climate change.

U.S. Energy Consumption, By Fuel Type

Natural gas accounts for just 22 percent of the nation's energy consumption. Natural gas advocates say that increased use would mean a cleaner environment and less dependence on foreign oil.





with the most to gain and the most to offer, was not at the bargaining table."

It's an especially harsh verdict because the Waxman-Markey bill was drafted only after high-profile negotiations with proponents of coal, nuclear, oil, wind, solar and other energy sources.

What Kept Natural Gas Out?

Three things kept natural gas away from that table.

First of all: politics. The industry likes Republicans and historically has funneled most of its campaign contributions to the GOP. But now, of course, it's the Democrats who control Congress.

Notes

Percentages do not total 100.

Source: Energy Information Agency, U.S. Department of Energy

Credit: Alyson Hurt / NPR

The second problem: The natural gas industry has a lot of global-warming skeptics. Fred Julander, president of Julander Energy Co. in Denver, isn't one of them, but he understands their perspective.

Read The Shale Series

Rediscovering Natural Gas By Hitting Rock Bottom
Sep. 22, 2009

Who's Looking At Natural Gas Now? Big Oil
Sep. 23, 2009

"They want to be honest brokers," Julander says. "They don't want to take advantage of something they don't believe in, even if it improves their bottom line if it's based on a falsehood — which is, I mean, is in some ways commendable, but in some ways is short-sighted."

And the industry's third problem is size. It's made up mostly of medium to [small companies](#) that can't compete on Capitol Hill.