



Environment Agency chief backs fracking and nuclear power

The UK Environment Agency chairman has voiced support for shale gas extraction and government plans to expand nuclear power generation.

Shale gas is extracted using a technology called hydraulic fracturing or fracking, which involves pumping large amounts of water and chemicals underground.

The chairman, Lord Smith of Finsbury, said fracking could be done safely and that the technology could improve Britain's energy security and end the need to import gas from abroad.

The Environment Agency is largely government funded and is the main environmental regulator for England and Wales, including areas important for the shale gas and nuclear power sector, such as air and land pollution and waste regulation.

"Domestically available (shale) gas supply would be beneficial for our energy needs and our energy security and it could be affordable," Smith said.

"However, we would want to monitor and regulate that process very rigorously," he added.

The technology has been blamed for causing slight earthquakes and been banned in several countries, but it has also transformed the U.S. energy sector and caused domestic energy prices there to plummet in recent years.

Smith said that fracking should only be developed if carbon capture and storage (CCS) methods were also available to make gas more environmentally friendly.

The UK plans to develop CCS technology to bury carbon dioxide emissions from its coal and gas power plants underground, but the technology is not commercially proven yet.

"If we end up going for a dash for gas in a few years time, which I suspect we may do, we have to have carbon capture and storage for gas fired power stations to capture the carbon rather than just releasing it," Smith said.

Smith also said that Britain needed nuclear power to combat climate change, although he doubted that the technology would play as great a role as the government wants it to.

"Building nuclear power stations is a long and difficult process and that means that 40 per cent (of the power generation mix) is probably going to be difficult, but I would say that nuclear has to be part of the overall landscape," he said.