

McKibbin's Scribbles: Goodbye, Shell, sorry to see you go

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Seven years ago, I was lucky to be chosen for a fellowship that allowed me to see, visit, learn and appreciate some of the many forms of energy and natural resources so common and part of the history of this region.

While on that nine-day bus tour, sleeping in motels and tents, and getting to know some really interesting and talented fellow journalists, we were given a tour of the Shell Mahogany oil shale research and development project near Rangely in Rio Blanco County. I was somewhat familiar with the project, having written several articles about it, and had the feeling that if anyone was going to finally get oil from rocks, it would be Shell. They seemed to have the long term vision, the commitment and a promising process that I thought might actually work.

But I've always remembered a fellow journalist, after we had been given a tour of Shell's site, asked me if I thought they could pull it off, make the dream of oil shale a reality. I said yes, I thought Shell was on the right track. She thought otherwise.

That was in 2006, and just the other day, I picked up a paper and read how Shell was pulling the plug on its project and ending its involvement in oil shale in Colorado after 17 years of work. I recalled my conversation with my colleague and couldn't help feeling regret. I had pulled for Shell to make it work.

I think in the end, the energy they needed to heat the shale rock hundreds, maybe thousands of feet underground, while also freezing the ground around the heated rock to protect the groundwater, was more than the energy they would get from the shale oil they would hope to bring to the surface.

That was my colleague's argument back then, and maybe she was the one who saw things correctly. Shell officials had told me back then that the cost issue wasn't a factor, but I think I knew it would always come done to that point. I'd learned early on that the energy industry was nothing if not bottom-line oriented. As are many other successful and key industries. Money makes the world go round, you know.

So while Shell's decision to cease work on three federal research and development leases north of Rifle won't have anywhere near the economic impact Exxon's closure of the Colony oil shale project outside Parachute did in the 1980s (only 10 to 50 workers at the Mahogany project compared to thousands at the Colony project), it's still disheartening news. While I'm not in the "just drill, baby" camp by any stretch, I'm not naive enough to think we don't have to have responsible energy development. I use gas and electricity, I drive a (economical) gas-powered car.

But there's just something alluring about oil shale. I get it. The whole national security angle, let alone the economic impact of a successful, commercial scale oil shale industry. Of course, there's the other side of the coin. Environmental (no, that's not a dirty word) impacts, social impacts, conflicts with other land uses, public health and safety issues are all involved.

But right now, I'm sad and disappointed at Shell's decision. I can't blame them, either. They came to this area with a goal of helping develop this country's energy resources in a responsible manner. The fact their process apparently didn't meet that goal is unfortunate. And maybe the lesson for all of us is to not look at the huge, multinational energy companies if we want to see oil shale become a reality in this neck of the woods.

Maybe the lesson is to not put all our eggs in one basket, either. As my colleague back then said, the idea of getting oil from rocks seems pretty far fetched. But then, didn't most of the world's major accomplishments?

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