

Britain approves fracking for Shale gas exploration

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The British government gave the go-ahead Thursday for exploratory hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, for shale gas, subject to stringent controls — a decision that potentially opens the way for a shale gas industry to begin developing in Western Europe.

“Shale gas represents a promising new potential resource for the U.K.,” Edward Davey, the energy and climate change secretary, said in a statement. He added: “We are still in the very early stages of shale gas exploration in the U.K. and it is likely to develop slowly.”

With the economy flagging, the government is under pressure from business to encourage the use of natural gas in power generation along with its large recent commitment to energy sources like offshore wind and nuclear, which are low carbon emitters but costly.

The gas industry and other interests argue that gas, which burns cleaner than coal, is a logical transition fuel until low carbon energy sources are sufficiently developed to take over the load decades in the future.

Substantial amounts of shale gas could also help compensate for the decline of oil and gas production in the North Sea — a mainstay of the British economy.

Shale gas “could contribute significantly to our energy security, reducing our reliance on imported gas as we move to a low carbon economy,” Mr. Davey said.

The decision — cautious as it is — is encouraging for a handful of companies interested in exploring for shale gas in Britain, notably Cuadrilla Resources, which has already spent tens of millions of dollars on a handful of shale gas wells in the Blackpool area of northeast England. Cuadrilla is backed by the U.S. private equity firm Riverstone Holdings, whose European chief is John Browne, the former BP chief executive. Lord Browne also is chairman of Cuadrilla’s board.

“Today’s news is a turning point for the country’s energy future,” Cuadrilla’s chief executive, Francis Egan, said in a statement.

Cuadrilla set back the shale gas cause in Britain and Europe last year when fracking on one of its wells triggered small earthquakes. In an interview last month Mr. Egan said pumping the fracking fluids into the ground lubricated natural faults in the earth, which then slid. Cuadrilla voluntarily ceased fracking operations, although it has been doing preparatory drilling at a site called Anna’s Road.

Mr. Egan said that based on Cuadrilla’s work the company thought there could be 200 trillion cubic feet of shale gas in the thick rock layers beneath the company’s 900 square kilometer, or 348 square mile, concession in Lancashire. If only 10 percent were recoverable, that could be enough gas to supply Britain for around seven years. Cuadrilla also has acreage in Poland.

Whether the gas will flow in commercial quantities has yet to be established. To find out, Cuadrilla wants to fracture at least three wells, some of which have already been drilled.

Before it starts fracking, Cuadrilla still needs to wait for the results of studies of the precautions it is taking to prevent further earthquakes as well as secure local planning permission. A Cuadrilla spokesman, Neil Cameron, said that the earliest the company was likely to be able to go ahead is March 2013.

Fracking is likely to stir opposition from environmentalists. Last year three activists from a small group called Frack-off entered a Cuadrilla site and chained themselves to the equipment. They were found guilty of trespassing and fined.

Fonte: The New York Times, New York, 14 Dec. 2012, International.