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'Fracking' – release of prospective resources of shale gas and coal bed methane.

The word 'fracking' refers to the process of Hydraulic fracturing, during which a fluid and sand is pumped into a borehole to initiate fractures in rock layers to release gas.

It has been suggested in the local media that significant prospective resources of shale gas and coal bed methane have been identified in Somerset. We also understand that in 2008, the then Government Department for Business, Enterprise and Regulatory Reform granted rights for two companies to search for oil and gas in and around the Mendips.

Whilst a Government inquiry has, to date, found no evidence that 'fracking' poses a direct risk to underground water supplies, provided the drilling well is properly constructed, concerns have been expressed by some environmental campaigners in Lancashire that the process has caused earth tremors and in the US it was claimed that inflammable gas was evident within tap water.

A Commons Committee have concluded that there is no need to slow down exploration work but urged the Department of Energy and Climate Change to monitor drilling activity closely in its early stages to assess impacts on water and air quality. Government authorisation is required for companies to drill wells and install facilities, while buildings need planning permission from the local authority.

The AONB Unit stance at this stage is to urge a very cautious approach to 'fracking'. We would have serious reservations about the process taking place within the designated landscape with regard to impacts on the character of the landscape from buildings and structures, on aquifers and the water table and on SSSI's and biodiversity. We are aware that Wells M.P. Tessa Munt is supportive of such an approach and we will be asking other local MPs to also lobby the Government on our behalf.

Currently we are not aware that the Government has authorised 'fracking' in the Mendips and that it is only investigation of reserves that has taken place.

There is further information on fracking on the BBC Somerset website via this link:

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-somerset-13748284>