



Communication Strategy of a successful Frack Campaign in the Netherlands

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In 2011, after several years without frack activities onshore in the Netherlands, a new conventional frack campaign was planned. In the interim, anti-shalegas sentiments had carried over from the US to Europe and various countries had announced a frack moratorium. The Netherlands was not amongst these yet, but it was recognized that starting a new conventional frack campaign could potentially result in a significant negative public sentiment and affect our License to Operate.

A team of subsurface and communication experts drafted a communication strategy that was premised on the “Discuss > Decide > Deliver” philosophy, implying that a decision on the campaign-start would only be taken after the results of the engagements with key stakeholders indicated sufficient support.

It was recognized that in order to start communication with stakeholders and the general public through engagements, infographics, websites etc., several minimum requirements had to be in place:

- 1] An explanation about why fracking is done and what it entails
- 2] An assessment and description of the risks (eg groundwater contamination, tremors)
- 3] A description of the REACH compliant chemicals used (composition & quantities).

With the basic info in place, a staged engagement process was set up where key stakeholders at the national level were informed first, followed by those at regional level (including waterboards), followed by local stakeholders. Several “Go-No go” decision points were build in. Throughout it was agreed that a target date for the actual frack campaign was only to be set once local engagements were going to start.

Several of the technical staff (eg subsurface and well engineers) received media and communication training to prep them for the engagements with external stakeholders and communities. Also several staff were identified that would be involved in the writing of Q&A's, external bulletins etc. Having technical staff involved in such communications helped build credibility and also exposed them first hand to the sentiments in society.

The first conventional frack was executed in 2012. Since then, 3-4 conventional frack jobs have been executed per year, most recently in January 2016. In the meantime, however, the public resistance against fracking has grown in certain areas. Several NGO's and political parties that aspire to a much more rapid transition to a sustainable society actively encourage these sentiments. Late 2011 a formal moratorium on shalegas operations came in effect and more than 200 municipalities had declared a shalegas-free status or were very critical about such activities. In 2015 a more stringent risk assessment of conventional fracking has been made mandatory for permit applications.

Our experience in this frack dossier (as well as other dossiers such as soil subsidence, induced seismicity, and water disposal) has shown that having a cadre of subsurface engineers that are capable of translating the often complex geoscientific issues into layman's terms, and are equipped to effectively and empathetically communicate is crucial. Also having access to experts (academically or otherwise) that are considered by all stakeholders to be independent is another key component.