On April 24, 2012, a gas-well blowout near Douglas released a cloud of natural (methane) gas that prompted evacuation of 50 residents. The disaster spewed 31,000 gallons of drilling fluid plus up to 2 million cubic feet of a fossil fuel known as "carbon on steroids."

"Released into the atmosphere, it traps heat, and over a 20-year time frame, the direct, irradiative effect of methane is 72 [times] stronger than [that of] carbon dioxide," Allen Best wrote in July 2012.

In other words, the damage to the people and their environment, and the damage to the atmosphere via released greenhouse gases, must have been considerable. Yet no fines were leveled either at the well owner or the drill-rig owner, mirroring the state's nonresponse to the Crosby 25-3 gas well blowout in Clark in 2006. The Douglas disaster was termed a "mishap" by Wyoming's oil and gas supervisor Tom Doll (who has since resigned). His main worry was fire prevention so that the corporate players "have a good chance of salvaging the rig and the well bore."

The natural-gas industry promotes its product as "clean and green," but a 2010 study by R. W. Howarth of Cornell University, "Preliminary Assessment of the Greenhouse Gas Emissions from Natural Gas Obtained by Hydraulic Fracturing," has concluded that "natural gas drilled out of the Marcellus Shale has a global greenhouse effect (per unit of energy created) roughly on par with coal obtained from mountain–top removal," writes Sandra Steingraber in "Raising Elijah."

In the Marcellus Shale, Steingraber writes, "A single fracking operation requires an access road, 2 to 8 million gallons of fresh water, between 10,000 and 40,000 gallons of chemicals, and at least 1,000 diesel truck trips. Between 34,000 and 95,000 wells are envisioned for New York State" (which currently has a moratorium against fracking wells).

Taking the lower number, she offers these statistics:

"Add to 34,000 four zeroes and multiply by a number between 1 and 4 to estimate the volume of chemicals that will be pumped into the ground. Add to 34,000 six or seven zeroes to estimate the volume of fresh water that will be used. Divide that product by 2 to determine, roughly, how many gallons of toxic flowback water will come back out of the hole and require disposal somewhere else. Use that same number to determine how many gallons of water will remain buried in the fractured bedrock. To 34,000, add three zeros to determine the number of diesel truck trips that will be added to the roads."

She adds a record of environmental and health hazards that could have been about Wyoming.

In August 2004, Princeton University scientists published an article in Science that envisioned a bold new future. Robert Socolow and Stephen Pacala stated that "Humanity already possesses the fundamental scientific, technical, and industrial know-how to solve the carbon and climate problem for the next half-century. A portfolio of technologies now exists to meet the world's energy needs over the next 50 years and limit atmospheric CO_2 . . . Every element in this portfolio has passed beyond the laboratory bench and demonstration project; many are already implemented somewhere at full industrial scale."

The fly in the ointment? To stabilize emissions before mid-century, implementation would have required a carbon tax of about $100 per ton on the toxic waste spewed into the atmosphere.

The two scientists followed up with "A Plan to Keep Carbon in Check," in Scientific American, September 2006. Regrettably, by then Lee Raymond of ExxonMobil had gained the ear of President G. W. Bush, with whose close friend and adviser, Allan Hubbard, the CEO met in the White House in April 2005. Nothing has come of the carbon containment advocated by the scientists.

Writes Steve Coll in "Private Empire: ExxonMobil and American Power": "With its ideological allies, ExxonMobil funded the promotion of public confusion about climate science by means that future employees and executives of the corporation are likely to look back on with regret."

Yes. You and me too.

To the Bush White House, CEO Raymond hammered home "an endless rise in the demand for the fossil fuels his company sells," indicating "there is nothing that can be done to alter that."

And today in Washington, the natural-gas industry works behind the scenes to block a green building rule that was expected to be a national model for carbon-neutral construction. The rule, called Fossil Fuel-Generated Energy Consumption Reduction, would zero out fossil-fuel use—coal, fuel oil, natural gas—in all new and renovated federal buildings by 2030. (The fed spends more than $7 billion a year to operate its inventory of 502,000 buildings.)

The green-building requirement falls under Section 433 of the Energy Independence and Security Act of 2007, a clean-energy law passed under George W. Bush, and the DOE's proposed rule was crafted under Obama. But in April 2012, the House Energy and Water Development subcommittee tacked a provision to a federal spending bill that would prohibit DOE from funding Section 433. The American Gas Association, with help from Representative Rodney Alexander, R-LA, seek to nix the carbon-neutral directive by choking off the money needed to complete the rulemaking.

U. S. natural-gas wells now number 490,000 across 31 states. In March 2012 Randy Ungall wrote that an additional 50,000 oil and gas wells will be started this year, "more than in all other nations combined." Of these, he said, fully 90 percent would never come online, were it not for hydraulic fracturing. In Wyoming, ExxonMobil fracks for petroleum as well as natural gas.

Like mountain-top removal, hydraulic fracturing leads us down the primrose path to a point of no return.