

## The Checks and Balances Project

*Holding government officials, lobbyists and corporate management accountable to the public*

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### **Oil Shale: a century-old science fiction story**

*The shale covered a large area and the state oil experts declare that promised development of the deposits will mark a new era in oil production of the country. – Pittsburgh Press, October 6, 1916*

With Americans struggling to pay the high price at the pump, some elected officials, industry lobbyists, and oil and gas companies are pointing to oil shale as the answer to our nation's energy issues.

They would have us believe the West sits on a sea of oil shale bigger than Saudi Arabia's oil reserves that can be easily developed into petroleum to provide Americans with cheap energy for decades to come. The problem with that story is that it is pure science fiction. Oil and gas companies have failed to develop oil shale as a commercial energy resource in the U.S. In fact, oil shale has been the fuel that is "just around the corner" for the last century.

The Checks and Balances Project used LexisNexis and Google News Archives to review oil shale coverage from 1910 through 1980. Our search turned up over 84,000 articles from U.S. newspapers. Many of the quotes in those articles are similar to what we hear from industry today. Oil shale is hailed as an energy boom and the next big thing in domestic fuel. When energy prices spike, politicians and energy industry representatives like to point at oil shale as a cure-all. Yet oil shale has still never been developed as a viable energy source.

Following is just a sampling of oil shale quotes in American newspapers over the last century.

June 2, 2011

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Outlet	Date	Quote (story/editorial text or person)	Speaker (where applicable)	Link (publicly available source provided where available)
<b>1910's</b>				
Pittsburgh Press	Oct 6, 1916	The bureau of mines refuses to make known the location of the amazing discovery. [...]  The <b>shale</b> covered a large area and the state oil experts declare that promised development of the deposits will mark a new era in oil production of the country.		<a href="http://tinyurl.com/3j6ue5y">http://tinyurl.com/3j6ue5y</a>
Christian Science Monitor	Mar 30, 1917	Thousands of acres of land in the rich <b>oil shale</b> area in western Colorado, productive of unlimited combustible and munitions material, have been filed on recently by Colorado and eastern syndicates, says the Times, and preparations are underway for the development of the fields this spring.		
<b>1920's</b>				
Berkeley Daily Gazette	Dec 30, 1922	[Headline] <b>Shale</b> will supply oil to nation soon		<a href="http://tinyurl.com/3nvj4mx">http://tinyurl.com/3nvj4mx</a>
Milwaukee Journal	Sept 26, 1923	<b>Oil shale</b> was hailed as the source of oil for heating purposes in the future by Victor C. Alderson, president of the Colorado School of Mines, Golden, CO, who presided at the national oil conference of the American mining congress at the auditorium Wednesday.	Victor C. Alderson, president, Colorado School of Mines	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/4x6rtt7">http://tinyurl.com/4x6rtt7</a>
Rochester Evening Journal	Sept 1, 1926	<b>Oil shale</b> and oil sand deposits are believed by members of the board to hold promise as a reserve supply of petroleum.	Excerpt from U.S. Geological Survey report	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/3fczctd">http://tinyurl.com/3fczctd</a>

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1930's				
Portsmouth Times	Nov 9, 1934	Exhaustion of oil reserves in the country will cause industry to produce sufficient <b>oil</b> to meet the needs of motorists from <b>shale</b> and coal. This was the assurance given to a special House interstate commerce sub-committee by leaders in the oil industry.		<a href="http://tinyurl.com/3qfetf8">http://tinyurl.com/3qfetf8</a>
1940's				
Deseret News	Jul 29, 1943	Senator Murdock returned to the capital today to participate in a committee hearing looking toward development of liquid fuels from western coal and <b>oil shale</b> .		<a href="http://tinyurl.com/3vstsmv">http://tinyurl.com/3vstsmv</a>
Kentucky New Era	Oct 18, 1946	Scientists forecast that within three years they can demonstrate a practical method of [oil shale] operation.		<a href="http://tinyurl.com/3lqfav4">http://tinyurl.com/3lqfav4</a>
1950's				
Deseret News	Mar 2, 1951	During the past several years, the government experimented with <b>oil-from-shale</b> operations at a plant near Rifle, Colo. The process was reported nearing a commercially feasible level.		<a href="http://tinyurl.com/4xvr4bp">http://tinyurl.com/4xvr4bp</a>
Deseret News	Oct 31, 1953	"Before too many years," he said, <b>shale oil</b> will "undoubtedly" play an important role in meeting growing fuel demands. He addressed the Rocky Mountain Oil and Gas Association convention.	Felix E. Wormser, assistant secretary, U.S. Department of Interior	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/3lbueqt">http://tinyurl.com/3lbueqt</a>
Deseret News	Oct 11, 1956	With the total demand for all types of energy continually going up the <b>oil shale</b> reserves in Utah and Colorado are going to be a lifesaver.	Reese T. Taylor, chairman of the board, Union Oil Company of California	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/3lmot3x">http://tinyurl.com/3lmot3x</a>

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1960's				
Desert News	Jun 7, 1967	But the U.S. could keep its allies supplied with oil if we could tap the <b>oil shale</b> deposits of Utah, Wyoming, and Colorado – which is one more reason why we should move ahead with development of this resource.	Editorial board of the Deseret News	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/3nrgztq">http://tinyurl.com/3nrgztq</a>
1970's				
Press-Courier	Jun 8, 1979	If everything goes the way the Carter administration and the oil industry figure it, the United States could be producing <b>oil from shale</b> rock in 10 to 15 years.		<a href="http://tinyurl.com/3trjsn5">http://tinyurl.com/3trjsn5</a>
Washington Post	Apr 25, 1978	Synthetic products are expected to account for about 2 percent of 1990 supplies, mostly from <b>oil shale</b> .	Exxon	
1980's				
Lawrence Journal-World	Aug 9, 1980	The American petroleum industry seems once again to be turning its attention to the development of <b>shale oil</b> resources as foreign petroleum prices continue to rise and political situations create new doubts about the availability of Middle East oil, at any price.	Editorial board of the Lawrence-Journal World	<a href="http://tinyurl.com/4ydqb4b">http://tinyurl.com/4ydqb4b</a>
Washington Post	Sept 28, 1980	But now those barriers have been breached and commercial [oil shale] development seems assured.		

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## SUMMARY

For a century, industry, academics, and politicians have heralded oil shale as a savior for America's energy future. Taxpayers have financially supported its research and development on our public lands. Yet, it still plays no role in our energy infrastructure because oil and gas companies have failed to produce oil shale commercially in the United States.

As Americans suffer the sticker shock of high gas prices, politicians in Washington use spin and rhetoric to promote oil shale, an extremely dirty resource that has failed to contribute to our energy needs despite one hundred years of failed attempts. These sample quotes spanning back to the 1920's demonstrate that oil shale has been, and continues to be, pure science fiction rather than a realistic energy resource for our country.

## DEFINITIONS

**Oil Shale:** Oil shale is a rock. There is no oil in oil shale. Instead, the shale rocks contain a waxy substance, kerogen, that when intensely heated liquefies to produce a precursor to crude oil. Most companies now researching oil shale extraction are looking into "in-situ" oil shale production, which is a process that would heat the rock in the ground and then extract the kerogen to the surface from production wells. Oil shale reserves in the United States are concentrated in Colorado, Wyoming and Utah.

Note, oil shale is often mistakenly reported in news stories as "shale oil." Where "shale oil" appears in the stories above, the writers or sources are actually referring to oil shale.

**Shale Gas:** Shale gas is natural gas trapped within shale formations. Drilling of those shale formations in Pennsylvania, Louisiana, Texas and other states has helped dramatically increase the nation's domestic natural gas production, but has resulted in a massive glut of the fossil fuel and driven gas prices down. Shale gas is found in formations such as the Marcellus and Barnett, as well as several other smaller formations throughout the United States.

**Shale Oil:** For years, oil and gas companies have known liquid oil is contained in shale formations underlying Montana, North Dakota and a region of land stretching across Wyoming, Colorado, Nebraska and Kansas.

Using techniques used in natural gas drilling, companies are now able to recover the liquid oil. Like in shale gas drilling, oil and gas companies drill deep far below the surface and then turn their drill bits to create horizontal wells. Once completed, the companies blast water, sand and chemicals at a high pressure into the wells that opens up fissures in the shale formations and allows oil to be pumped to the surface.