For those of you who don't know what it is, hydraulic fracturing (or fracking, as it is commonly called) is a process of extracting natural gas or oil from layers of rock deep within the Earth. Vertical and horizontal wells are drilled into the ground and millions of gallons of water mixed with sand and highly toxic chemicals are injected into the wells. This mixture is injected with an intense pressure, which creates fractures in the rocks, allowing natural gas to escape.

The fracking process has a long history and a lot of controversy surrounding it. While hydraulic fracturing itself isn't new, it has recently developed into a larger, and more detrimental, process. Unfortunately, the fracking industry is looking to start drilling here in McLean County.

I had known about fracking for a while, having seen the documentary "Gasland." But it wasn't until I interned at the Ecology Action Center last summer that I really learned about it. During my time there, I was asked to research fracking and write an article detailing the local and federal regulations that pertained to it. I was shocked to find that Illinois does not have strong legislation that prohibits fracking from destroying our land.

There are many threats that come with fracking, the biggest being the risk of contamination. Hundreds of toxic chemicals are injected into the wells, and according to the Illinois People's Action website, 29 of these chemicals "are known or possible human carcinogens [and] hazardous air pollutants under the Clean Air Act."

Why would we want to be around these dangerous chemicals? There is also the risk for natural gas to leak through the wells and pollute the local groundwater. If you've seen the video clip of a man setting his water on fire, that's the result of fracking.

On Nov. 9, I went to a public meeting about fracking in McLean County held by the Illinois People's Action. This meeting helped give those in attendance an understanding of what hydraulic fracturing is and why we need to have it banned. There were several speakers who gave different perspectives on this situation. One woman, who lives in the southern part of Illinois, spoke about how she was contacted by a representative of a gas company who offered to buy her land. Even though she did not sign the lease to give her property over to the company, the representative told her that if 51 percent of landowners in any district agreed to lease their land to the company, the remaining residents would be subjected to drilling and waste disposal on their land.

The threat of fracking is real and can soon turn into a nightmare for McLean County. If fracking were to take place here, the local landscape would completely change. Country roads would be a mess from all the heavy truck traffic, local water and air would become polluted and all of the green practices that Bloomington and Normal have worked for would be for nothing. Sand mining would begin near Starved Rock State Park to retrieve the sand needed for the fracking

process, which could have negative impacts on the park.

If you're still not convinced about the devastating effects of fracking, consider this: When companies begin drilling, they drill hundreds of wells to extract the gas. The amount of water that is needed for only 73 wells would completely drain Lake Bloomington.

As students, we may only be in this area for four years, but that is no reason to ignore this. If you have enjoyed your time here and appreciate the wonderful area that is around us, help stop fracking from ruining the future of our state.

Questions or comments to Caitlin's column can be sent to: dv_cjperry@exchange.ilstu.edu.