

The Fight Against Fracking in California

Will a new lawsuit save public lands from getting fracked?

By Alastair Bland

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A recent deal between the federal Bureau of Land Management and several energy companies has put more than 2,500 acres of California public land, mostly in Monterey County, at risk of being fracked — an oil and gas extraction technique that environmentalists say is one of the dirtiest in the industry. But with hopes of stopping the fracking before it begins, two environmental groups are suing. The lawsuit, filed on December 8 in federal district court in San Jose by the Center for Biological Diversity and the Sierra Club, alleges that fracked oil and gas development projects could threaten landscapes, recreation opportunities, air and water quality, and endangered or threatened species.

Properly known as hydraulic fracturing, fracking involves shooting large amounts of water, sand, and chemicals into the earth to break apart rock structure and release reservoirs of oil or natural

gas. Environmentalists have decried the activity as a cause of serious groundwater contamination, and the US Environmental Protection Agency recently reported fracking to be the suspected source of subterranean reservoir pollution in some locations. Yet the federal government leased 2,343 acres of public land in Monterey County and 240 acres in Fresno County to three oil and gas companies for a total of \$257,051 on September 14 without, environmentalists say, conducting an adequate review of potential environmental impacts.

The suit contends that the bureau went ahead and leased “sensitive lands in California for oil and gas development without analyzing the full environmental effects of doing so,” which would be a breach of the national Environmental Policy Act. “It’s just absurd and outrageous that the Bureau of Land Management would be selling our public lands to

fracking without conducting a real environmental review,” said Kassie Siegel, senior council at the Center for Biological Diversity.

The Bureau of Land Management released a lengthy environmental assessment last spring and subsequently accepted public comments before leasing the lands to Vintage Production California LLC in Bakersfield; Lone Tree Energy in Littleton, Colorado; and energy development baron Neil Ormond of Clovis. Erin Curtis, a spokesperson for the bureau, wrote in an email that the assessment included “a general analysis” of the potential impacts of extracting fuel sources with fracking.

Siegel conceded that “the paper is there. Our point is just that we don’t believe their environmental assessment is adequate.”