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## Environmental groups call for fracking moratorium in California

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By Steven T. Jones  
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California's biggest environmental organizations are gathering in Sacramento tomorrow (Wed/25) to call for a moratorium on the controversial practice of hydraulic fracturing – also known as fracking, in which a mixture of water and chemicals is injected at high pressure deep underground to increase production in oil and natural gas wells – until its impacts are better understood.

The occasion is the last in a series of workshops on the issue by the California Department of Conservation's Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources, which is considering new rules on a practice that is mostly unregulated in California. Other recent legislative [1] and administrative efforts to address fracking [2] have been scuttled by the powerful fossil fuel industry.

Earlier this year, Sen. Fran Pavley (D-Santa Monica) discovered [3] that state officials didn't even know how much fracking is happening in California – while it requires state permits to drill an oil or natural gas well, fracking them doesn't – although the industry has since estimated [4] that more than 600 wells were fracked last year, most of them in Kern County around Bakersfield.



Gasland and its depictions of flammable drinking water stirred public concern over fracking.

But there is growing concern by environmentalists that the oil industry plans to expand its use of fracking in the Monterey shale formations that run from the Central Coast to the Central Valley, where an estimated 15 billion barrels of oil could be extracted if loosened up by fracking.

“We’re calling for the Division of Oil and Gas to slow down and not rush through these regulations,” said Andrew Grinberg, spokesperson for Clean Water Action. “We’re calling for a moratorium until we have good regulations that ensure the protection of our water, air, health, and communities.”

Other organizations joining the event – which begins at 5:30pm outside the California Environmental Protection Agency building at 1001 1st St. in Sacramento, where the DOGGR hearing will be held at 7pm – and the call for a moratorium includes the Sierra Club, Planning and Conservation League, Center for Biological Diversity, Environment California, and Food & Water Watch.

Public concerns about fracking have been on the increase in recent years, fueled by a high-profile debate in New York [5] about ending a state moratorium against the practice and by alarming stories of groundwater

contamination caused by fracking – including cases in which hydrocarbon content in drinking water is so high that people could set their faucets on fire – told in the 2010 documentary film Gasland [6] and other media accounts.

But Tupper Hull, spokesperson for the influential trade group Western States Petroleum Association, told us fracking has been happening in California for 60 years – almost exclusively in oil wells rather than for the natural gas fields discussed in Gasland – and that it has not caused any detrimental environmental impacts, nor has its use been increasing, despite the increased public attention to the practice.

“We understand there is a lot of interest in this topic and questions about the technology,” Hull said. “We expect there will be new regulations and whatever they are, we hope they are based on facts and science and not emotional responses.”

But he said WSPA opposes the call for a moratorium because “this is a technology that aids in the production of energy.”

Yet the environmental groups say the need for energy shouldn’t cause government to abdicate its role of studying and regulating a potentially harmful practice that was given a broad federal exemption from the Clean Water Act by Congress in 2005, when it approved the Energy Policy Act that was spearheaded by then-Vice President Dick Cheney.

Environmental groups dubbed it the “Halliburton loophole” after Cheney’s former employer, which has greatly expanded the use of fracking in the US.