



Viewpoints:

California should take the lead on rules for fracking

By Kassie Siegel
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The fracking boom has made its way to California. Companies are already fracking in at least six counties and they're poised to expand operations.

Unfortunately, state officials have so far shown a dangerous indifference to the risks of hydraulic fracturing, and California's air, water and wildlife – and ultimately many state residents – will pay the price.

Fracking involves blasting millions of gallons of water, along with sand and toxic chemicals, deep into the earth to break up rocks and extract oil and gas. Amid growing contamination concerns nationally, state legislatures in New York, New Jersey and Vermont have enacted bans or moratoriums.

But California officials have seemed unconcerned. The Department of Conservation's oil and gas division has acknowledged that it does not even monitor, let alone regulate, fracking.

Yes, that's right: California regulators have no idea when, where or in how many wells fracking is occurring in the state – or even what chemicals are used in the

process. It is, of course, impossible to protect the public from fracking risks in the absence of such basic information.

Now the Brown administration, following months of pressure from environmental advocates and state lawmakers, has announced plans to create fracking regulations. A series of workshops, including one in Sacramento on July 25, will kick off that process. That's a start, but the devil will be in the details.

After so much foot-dragging, state officials will need to convince the public that they are serious about regulating this practice. Indeed, some concerns will be hard to resolve, which is one reason other states have simply banned or imposed moratoriums on fracking.

State lawmakers are also focusing on the issue. Assembly Bill 591, introduced by Assemblyman Bob Wieckowski, D-Fremont, was conceived to require the disclosure of fracking information. But the current version of the bill is patently inadequate and even counterproductive.

Transparency is certainly a critical first step. State officials and the public need

to know where and when companies are fracking, how much water is being used, what chemicals are being employed and how contaminated water is being disposed of. And the industry needs to disclose this basic information before a project begins – not after the damage is done.

But as currently drafted, AB 591 would allow the oil and gas industry to withhold critical information – including what chemicals are used and where fracking is occurring – simply by claiming the information constitutes a “trade secret.” Moreover, the bill requires disclosure only after fracking operations are completed, making it impossible to determine ahead of time whether the operation is safe.

Legislators should strip the loopholes from AB 591 and pass a strong fracking disclosure bill as soon as possible.

Actual regulation is also critical. Both lawmakers and state regulators need to make protection of the state’s drinking water, aquifers and lakes from contamination a top priority.

Fracking requires an enormous amount of water – as much as 5 million gallons per well. And it routinely employs chemicals like methanol, lead, arsenic, chromium-6 and benzene. The evidence is quickly mounting throughout the country that chemicals like these are making their way into aquifers and drinking water.

Fracking also threatens California’s wildlife. Endangered species such as the California condor, San Joaquin kit fox and blunt-nosed leopard lizard live in places where fracking will likely proliferate. These animals can be killed or harmed in many ways by fracking and the industrial development that accompanies it. These problems will get bigger very quickly. Rising oil prices are driving up interest in the Monterey Shale, a geological formation under the San Joaquin and Los Angeles basins that holds an estimated 15 billion barrels of oil. That’s roughly two-thirds of U.S. shale oil reserves.

There’s also a larger concern. As California strives to lead the world in the fight to head off a climate change catastrophe, why should the state facilitate the release of carbon in the billions of barrels of oil now safely sequestered in our shale formations? Fracking also often releases large amounts of methane, a particularly potent greenhouse gas.

In the end, it may be wiser for our lawmakers to follow the lead of other states and ban fracking. There just isn’t a compelling reason to aid and abet this dangerous, polluting industry.

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