

Commentary:

Offshore fracking poses environmental risks

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A new study of hazardous hydraulic fracturing chemicals used in offshore oil wells in Southern California reveals the dangers of fracking to wildlife and human health, according to the Associated Press.

My organization's analysis of chemicals used in 12 recent frack jobs in state waters near Long Beach reveals that at least one-third of those chemicals are suspected ecological hazards. More than a third are suspected of affecting the human developmental and nervous systems.

The chemical X-Cide, used in all 12 offshore frack jobs examined by my organization, is classified as a hazardous substance by the federal agency that manages cleanup at Superfund sites. X-Cide is also listed as hazardous to fish and wildlife.

In a letter sent to the Coastal Commission, we called on the state agency to use its authority to halt fracking for oil and gas in state waters and press for tighter regulation in federal waters.

Fracking involves blasting massive amounts of water and industrial chemicals into the earth at pressures high enough to crack geologic formations and release oil and gas.

The commission has the power and the responsibility to step in when oil companies use dangerous chemicals to frack California's ocean waters. Fracking is an inherently dangerous activity that has no place in the offshore environment, and we urge the commission to take immediate action to halt fracking.

However, absent a total ban there are several steps the commission can take toward limiting the practice in state and federal waters and ensure the continued health of our coastal ecosystem.

In the past few months, records uncovered by journalists have revealed that fracking in our fragile offshore environment is occurring unchecked. Oil companies have used fracking at least 200 times in waters off Long Beach, Seal Beach and Huntington Beach, and well as in federal waters in the Santa Barbara Channel.

About half of the oil platforms in federal waters in the Santa Barbara Channel discharge all or a portion of their wastewater directly to the ocean. This produced wastewater contains all of the chemicals injected originally into the fracked wells, with the addition of toxins gathered from the subsurface environment.

Water pollution from fracking and oil operations in California's waters poses risks to a wide range of threatened and endangered species, including blue whales, sea otters and leatherback turtles.

Because many risks from fracking cannot be eliminated, a complete prohibition on fracking is the best way to protect human health and the environment. We urge the commission to take seriously its charge under the Coastal Act to "protect the ecological balance of the coastal zone and prevent its deterioration and destruction."

Frankly, it's truly disturbing how little government officials at either the state or federal level seem to know about offshore fracking in California. But we know enough to be gravely concerned. Our beaches, our wildlife and our entire coastal ecosystem are at risk until the state reins in this dangerous practice.

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