

Environmental groups cite evidence of fracking in state waters to up pressure on Coastal Commission to ban the practice

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Environmental groups are using information provided by the oil industry to up their pressure on the California Coastal Commission to ban hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, in coastal waters. The groups say the Commission should at least impose a "time-out" on fracking while it investigates the procedure's impact on the ocean and marine life.

Fracking is on the Coastal Commission's agenda when it meets Thursday in Santa Cruz.

The Center for Biological Diversity, Surfrider, and the Santa Barbara-based Environmental Defense Center point to oil producers' own disclosures on the industry-run website FracFocus. Thums and Occidental Petroleum told FracFocus, which tracks well operation information, about chemicals the companies used in oil production along the nearshore coast, in California state waters.

The groups say they have no information about the environmental impacts from fracking at these sites, because it doesn't appear anyone conducted an environmental impact analysis. And, they say, because the reporting to FracFocus is voluntary, "this compilation [of a dozen records since Jan. 1, 2011] is

virtually certain to be an underestimate of the actual number of frack jobs that have already occurred."

CBD, Surfrider, and the Environmental Defense Center now want the Coastal Commission to "prohibit hydraulic fracturing for new and existing projects through its authority to regulate oil and gas development in the coastal zone." Lawmakers are asking coastal commissioners for an investigation too.

While the groups believe a permanent ban is "the only way to adequately protect the California coast," they argue that, due to "the current regulatory vacuum at both the state and federal level," the Commission should at least "institute a much needed time-out while offshore fracking is investigated."

The concerns CBD and others are raising about fracking in California waters come as state legislators are asking federal authorities to investigate new evidence of fracking in federal waters off of central California. Environmentalists and the Associated Press obtained permits and emails documenting at least a dozen occasions when companies used hydraulic fracturing techniques to produce oil and gas from offshore wells.

Coastal oil production in federal waters is the purview of federal authorities. But the Coastal Commission, which has said it had no idea fracking was happening offshore at all, does have authority over state waters.

It's interesting to see the Environmental Defense Center involved in the effort to ban fracking in coastal waters. Five years ago, the Santa Barbara-based group bucked the anti-drilling sentiment prevalent among a lot of activists to back the Tranquillon Ridge project. EDC made an agreement with Plains Exploration to back oil extraction at that site in exchange for a promise by Plains to end other coastal drilling operations. But the State Lands Commission and other regulators were skeptical of the deal and opposed the project, saying that the promises wouldn't be enforceable.