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## BLM launches assessment of Calif. oil, gas leasing

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SACRAMENTO, Calif.—Federal land managers will launch a statewide scientific assessment of oil and gas development in California, a victory for environmentalists concerned about impacts of hydraulic fracturing nationwide.

The Bureau of Land Management announced Friday that it will conduct the in-depth environmental study of fracking and other oil and gas recovery projects in a cooperative project with the state.

The decision comes after a federal judge determined the BLM violated environmental law by auctioning off the rights to extract oil using the controversial process on 2,500 acres of prime public lands in Monterey County.

The BLM says the outcome of its assessment could establish additional environmental protections on those parcels.

“We’re pleased that federal officials are finally starting the full analysis of fracking pollution’s dangers that should have been done before these public lands were auctioned off to oil companies,” said Brendan Cummings, senior counsel at the Center for Biological Diversity.

The Center and the Sierra Club sued in a challenge to the BLM’s decision to auction the land without studying potential impacts. In April a judge sided with the environmental groups.

“The court said the BLM downplayed the likelihood of development on those parcels or impacts,” Cummings said. “We said it’s highly likely they’ll be developed and we’re concerned about impacts to water. Fracking changes everything. Places that weren’t economic to drill are now.”

The parcels covered in the lawsuit include stretches of southern Monterey County lauded by John Steinbeck in *East of Eden* and other novels. It’s where cattle ranchers, wine grape growers and row crop farmers rely on tight water supplies. The area is also part of the historic range of the endangered California condor, whose global population is estimated at fewer than 400 birds.

Prior to the auction Democratic Rep. Sam Farr, who represents the region, had asked the BLM to delay the awarding of leases over concerns the agency wasn’t doing enough to monitor potential impacts of fracking. Half of Californians favor stricter regulations of fracking, according to a survey released this week by the Public Policy Institute of California.

The U.S. Energy Information Administration estimated last year that California's Monterey Shale formation, which stretches along the central and southern California coasts and into the southern San Joaquin Valley, contains more than 15 billion barrels of "technically recoverable shale oil," more than the amount contained in the Bakken oil fields of Montana and North Dakota.

Industry officials say hydraulic fracturing is one of many techniques used since the 1940s, and concerns are overblown, especially since companies are still determining whether it is economically viable to develop the Monterey Shale.

In response to the legal challenges, the BLM announced Friday that it will develop an Environmental Impact Statement for regions in California with existing leases and where companies have expressed interest in leases.

"The planning process, coupled with the findings of the science assessment, will improve our resource management plans," said BLM California State Director Jim Kenna in a written statement. "This approach goes a long way toward bringing the most current scientific information on industry practices to planning and public dialogue about oil and gas leasing and development."

Preliminary issues to be addressed include surface and ground water, air quality, greenhouse gases and the impacts of the chemicals pumped into shale to loosen deposits.