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State needs ground rules for fracking

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Clearly, the oil industry's ready to frack. Meanwhile, the state's barely moving at all on much-needed regulations and oversight for this practice. California voters haven't even had a chance to debate whether we should allow fracking at all.

For the past couple of years, the Legislature has considered bills to restrict the practice - bills that died due to industry opposition. State Sen. Fran Pavley, D-Agoura Hills (Los Angeles County), is the author of a current bill that would require the industry to disclose information about the amount of water and chemicals it's using. The bill, SB4, has cleared the state Senate's Natural Resources and Water Committee, but it's got a long way to go. And disclosure is only the bare beginning of a much-needed public debate on fracking.

Gov. Jerry Brown, working through a state agency, released some draft regulations back in December. But the rule-making process has yet to begin, may last for more than a year, and the draft regulations aren't much.

Frustrated with the state's inability to take action, the South Coast Air Quality Management District adopted its own rule on fracking last week: requiring oil companies to notify the agency before beginning operations and to disclose all the

California needs to create a game plan on how the state is going to handle the fracking industry, and fast.

Fracking is a method of extracting oil or natural gas from rock formations. It involves the heavy use of water (a natural resource that's scarce in California) mixed with sand and chemicals to blast open the rocky ground that's difficult to otherwise access for fuel extraction. It's hugely controversial for many reasons - the water depletion, the release of a greenhouse gas, methane, into the atmosphere, and the extensive use of chemicals that can leak into the environment, badly affecting wildlife and public health.

It's also a top priority for the oil and gas industry - and the reason behind an oil boom in North Dakota. Companies are already fracking in California on a limited basis. There's also been quite a bit of interest in exploring the Monterey shale deposit that runs through the center of the state, though the oil industry may be forced to move slowly there. A federal judge just ruled that the Obama administration violated the law by issuing oil leases in Monterey County without considering the environmental impacts of fracking first.