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NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S LARGEST NEWSPAPER

Fracking foes push Brown to take position



Fracking opponents want Gov. Jerry Brown to ban the controversial practice in California

By David R. Baker, Associated Press
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100,000 sign petitions - but fears overblown, oil industry officials say

Fracking opponents have formed a united front in California, calling last week for a halt to the controversial oil-industry practice.

And they're trying to push a reluctant Gov. Jerry Brown - who has not yet taken a position on fracking - off the fence. A new coalition of environmental groups,

Californians Against Fracking, staged protests outside the governor's offices in San Francisco and Los Angeles on Thursday, demanding that Brown ban hydraulic fracturing in the state. They delivered petitions signed by more than 100,000 people.

"Fracking pollution threatens our air and water and Gov. Brown's legacy as an environmental leader," said Rose Braz, with the Center for Biological Diversity.

Fracking - which involves pumping pressurized water, sand and chemicals underground to crack rocks - has revolutionized oil and

natural gas production in the United States. But it has not yet taken off in California, even though the state holds what could be the nation's largest oil-bearing shale formation.

Many California environmentalists want to make sure the state never experiences the kind of fracking boom that has transformed swaths of North Dakota and Pennsylvania, turning farmland into oil fields. Fracking has been blamed for tainting water supplies and worsening air pollution, although the industry insists that those fears are overblown.

Not taking sides

Brown boasts solid green credentials, pushing hard to increase California's use of renewable power and to fight global warming. But his few public comments on fracking have avoided taking sides. He has, at times, sounded far more open to the practice than many of his environmental supporters would like.

"The fossil fuel deposits in California are incredible, the potential is extraordinary," he said in March in comments reported by the Reuters news service. "But between now and development lies a lot of questions that need to be answered."

Rules on the way

The state agency that oversees oil drilling - the Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources - is developing regulations for fracking. But many fracking foes don't trust the agency, saying it is too friendly to the industry it regulates. They want a ban.



Liz Hafalia, The Chronicle

People gather at California state offices in S.F. to seek a hydraulic fracturing ban. Oil companies have fracked 974 wells in the state since the start of 2011.

"Our top-line message is there's no safe way to frack," said Adam Scow, California campaigns director for Food & Water Watch, which is part of the new coalition. "This is a state where we already have air pollution problems, water pollution problems."

Fracking isn't new

Oil industry representatives say fracking foes are using scare tactics to demonize a practice that could benefit the state economy. Oil companies, they note, have used fracking on a small scale in California for 60 years.

"The activists at today's rallies aren't interested in facts," said Dave Quast, California director for Energy in Depth, a project of the California Independent Petroleum Association. "They are engaged in an ideologically motivated campaign to shut down domestic energy production and put even more Californians out of work."

The Monterey Shale, which stretches beneath the southern San Joaquin Valley and parts of the Central Coast, holds 15.4 billion barrels of oil, according to a federal government estimate. A study released this year by the University of Southern California forecast that developing the shale could bring California \$24.6 billion in new tax revenue by 2020.

Oil companies have fracked 974 wells in California since the start of 2011, according to a website that compiles fracking data nationwide. And yet production from the Monterey Shale has not exploded the way it has in North Dakota or Texas. California's complex and convoluted underground geology, experts say, has made tapping the shale formation's oil difficult.

Jury 'out a little bit'

"I think the jury's out a little bit on the Monterey Shale," said John Watson, CEO of Chevron Corp., the largest oil producer in California. "I don't think we've completed - the industry has completed - the assessment enough to reach a conclusion."

A flurry of bills in Sacramento this spring called for halting fracking in the state until its possible risks could thoroughly be studied. One bill died in the Assembly Thursday after it was amended so much that many of its initial backers no longer supported it, Scow said.

Senate passes bill

The California Senate, meanwhile, passed a bill by Sen. Fran Pavley, D-Agoura Hills (Los Angeles County), that would allow fracking to continue while a risk-assessment study was conducted. If the state did not complete the study by 2015, all fracking in the state would come to a halt.

But some environmentalists who usually count Pavley as an ally have been loath to back her bill. Some want a moratorium to come first. Others want an outright ban, hence their appeal to the governor.

"Brown should not wait for the Legislature," Scow said. "He could do this now."