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Fracking's risks underscored by science

Viewpoint

By Kassie Siegel

Oil companies exist to make a profit, not to protect people's health or the environment, so it's not surprising that a petroleum industry spokesperson would shrug off concerns about fracking pollution ("Not science or law, just politics," Tribune, May 29).

But the facts underscore the risks facing California as we stand on the cusp of a massive expansion of fracking, a dangerous technique that involves blasting huge amounts of water mixed with industrial chemicals into the ground to shatter rocks and release oil and gas.

Just ask the people of Washington Township, in Pennsylvania, where a company fracking for natural gas spilled thousands of gallons of fracking waste-fluid into the environment last month. The same company was responsible for an even larger release of fracking wastewater in the same area in March.

Similar spills and accidental releases of oil, fracking wastewater and other fluids have happened thousands of times across the country in recent years.

Air pollution is also tied to fracking. A study from the Colorado School of Public Health found that people living near fracked wells are at higher risk of health problems, including asthma and cancer. And fracking releases large quantities of methane, a dangerously potent greenhouse gas.

The oil industry is especially keen to deny that fracking activities carry serious earthquake risks. But injection wells used to dispose of contaminated wastewater produced by fracking and oil production have been tied to the largest earthquake in Oklahoma history, according to a recently published study by researchers at the University of Oklahoma, Columbia University and the U.S. Geological Survey.

Despite these dangers, California oil and gas regulators don't yet regulate or even track fracking. Our state government doesn't know where and when fracking is happening or what dangerous chemicals are being pumped into the ground.

Meanwhile, oil companies are buying up thousands of acres across central and Southern California, around some of our state's most important agricultural land and beautiful wildlife habitat. Armed with dangerous new techniques, the industry is gearing up to exploit California's enormous reservoir of previously inaccessible shale oil.

As fracking expands across our state, it poses scientifically verified threats to the air we breathe and the water we drink. That's why a growing number of Californians support efforts to halt this dirty, dangerous technique.

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