

Santa Cruz Sentinel

Coastal Commission to investigate offshore fracking

By Jason Hoppin
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SANTA CRUZ -- Blindsided by revelations of fracking in waters off the coast of California, the state's Coastal Commission on Thursday vowed an investigation into the controversial practice, including what powers the agency has to regulate it.

The decision came weeks after reports that the oil industry has fracked wells in federal waters off the coast, an activity that has drawn the attention of state lawmakers. Environmental groups also produced documents this week showing fracking has occurred on a dozen wells just off the coast of Long Beach, in state waters.

"We take our obligation to protect the marine environment very seriously and we will be looking at this very carefully," said Charles Lester, executive director of the Coastal Commission.

The agency, which met this week in Santa Cruz, has clear oversight over oil production in state waters. But it also verifies federal approvals for compliance with state coastal regulations, though it has never held up a project.

"If anybody has the wherewithal and the ability to get to the bottom of something it is the Coastal Commission," said Dan Haifley, executive director of the Santa Cruz-based O'Neill Sea Odyssey. "I think they'll do a very

thorough investigation on what is a new, unstable element in a less than stable technology, which is offshore oil drilling."

Haifley was one of about 20 locals who packed the Coastal Commission meeting in downtown Santa Cruz on Thursday, doubling the size of the crowd. They all spoke out against fracking, citing environmental risks.

"(The oil industry's) bottom line isn't our welfare, and as the Coastal Commission, representing the people of California and all other living creatures of the Central Coast, this is your opportunity to be our advocate for health and safety," said Phyllis Greenleaf, a local educator who serves on the board of the Live Oak Unified School District.

In addition to earlier revelations of a dozen instances of deep-water fracking, the San Francisco-based Center for Biological Diversity produced documents this week showing a number of wells on the so-called "oil islands" in San Pedro Bay near Long Beach have also been fracked.

"I was satisfied to hear that they're taking it seriously, and it's sort of shocking that they didn't know about it," said Emily Jeffers, a staff attorney with the Center of Biological Diversity.

Los Angeles-based Occidental Petroleum, which owns several of the wells near Long Beach, did now reply to a request to comment.

The revelations clearly caught the Coastal Commission unaware. It set no time line for its investigation, which will include talks with state and federal regulators authorities and a dive into the process for fracking in a marine environment.

"We do not yet understand the extent of fracking in federal or state waters, nor fully understand its risks," said Coastal Commission Deputy Director Allison Dettmer, who will lead the effort.

Hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, is a process of injecting a brew of pressurized water and chemicals into the ground to free up previously unattainable oil. The process has fueled economic booms from North Dakota to West Texas.

Fracking has occurred in California for decades, and with the popularity of the practice the state Legislature is weighing a package of regulations. Numerous water quality, geologic and environmental issues have arisen from the process of reinjecting the wastewater back into the earth.

Last week, several state lawmakers -- including Assemblymember Mark Stone, D-Scotts Valley, a former vice chair of the Coastal Commission -- asked federal regulators to open a probe into offshore fracking. Those lawmakers also sent an Aug. 8 letter to the Coastal Com-

mission urging it to take up the issue.

In a statement prepared for the Commission's meeting on Thursday, Stone said it was time for some oversight of the practice.

"We know that oil fields off of our coast can leak into the ocean," Stone said. "Imagine if those leaks contain fracking fluids and chemical cocktails that had been injected into offshore wells."