

Offshore Fracking Uproar Grows in California In Wake of Truthout Report

By [Mike Ludwig](#), [Truthout](#) Thursday, 22 August 2013

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In the three weeks since a Truthout investigation revealed that federal regulators have approved at least two hydraulic fracturing operations in federal waters of the Santa Barbara Channel since 2009, a state commission has launched an investigation into the practice, California lawmakers have demanded a federal investigation, and environmental groups discovered that fracking also has occurred in state waters.

[Internal government documents](#) released to Truthout under the Freedom of Information Act [show that fracking technology has been deployed](#) at least a dozen times in federal ocean waters, including a "frack pack" in the Santa Barbara Channel approved by federal regulators this year.

As the story reverberated through the media, [environmental groups reviewed](#) state records and [FracFocus.org](#), an online database that allows oil and gas firms to voluntarily disclose well information, and found that fracking also has occurred at least a dozen times in state waters since 2011. In California, the first three miles of ocean off the coast fall under state jurisdiction and waters beyond are considered federal.

Under heavy pressure from environmental groups and state politicians, the California Coastal Commission [launched an investigation last week](#) into the practice of offshore fracking. The commission, which is charged with protecting California's coastal resources, had said it was not aware that fracking technology was being used offshore until recent media reports shed light on the issue.

On August 6, nine California lawmakers sent letters to the Interior Department and the Environmental Protection Agency [demanding a federal investigation](#) into offshore fracking. Both agencies say the letters are under review, and EPA spokesman David Yogi said his agency would address the lawmakers' concerns in the next few weeks.

The lawmakers also [asked the coastal commission to review](#) federal offshore fracking permits and use its authority to block fracking activities that could harm the California coast.

Environmental groups worry that fracking threatens marine habitats and have asked the commission to halt the practice until more information becomes available.

In 2012, [Truthout reported](#) that a company called Venoco had quietly used fracking techniques in early 2010 to produce oil in the Santa Barbara Channel, where drilling remains controversial because of a catastrophic oil spill in 1969. On July 25, [Truthout published a special investigation](#), along with government documents released under the Freedom of Information Act by the Interior Department's Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE), revealing details on offshore fracking in the Pacific Ocean for the first time.

About a week after the Truthout report was published, The Associated Press published a similar report that also was based on a Freedom of Information Act Request, drawing further attention to the issue.

Fracking is an oil-and-gas extraction technique that involves forcing sand, water and chemicals into the earth at high pressure to break up underground rock. Offshore drillers used fracking to provide well stability and stimulate old wells.

Federal officials say offshore fracking operations are much smaller than the horizontal onshore operations that have sparked a nationwide controversy, but the Center for Biological Diversity and other eco-groups argue that fracking's potential impacts on ocean environments have not been reviewed properly, as required by federal and state law.

"Offshore fracking poses a deadly threat to California's fragile marine environment," said Miyoko Sakashita, the Center for Biological Diversity's oceans program director. "This dangerous practice is being used in our

oceans with very little government knowledge or oversight. The best way for the coastal commission to protect our water and wildlife is to call an immediate time-out on offshore fracking.”

Internal communications released by BSEE, which approves federal offshore drilling permits, revealed that top regulators were uncertain about the number of fracking operations in federal waters and openly wondered how the agency could approve offshore fracking jobs without issuing an environmental impact review.

“What’s truly scary is how little government officials seem to know about offshore fracking,” Sakashita said. “No one at the state or federal level really has a handle on where this risky process is being used or what dangerous chemicals are being pumped into our oceans. But we do know that offshore fracking increases California’s risk of a devastating oil spill or release of toxic fracking fluid.”

Fracking operations off the California coast have included cancer-causing chemicals such as methanol and 2-Butoxyethanol, according to FracFocus.org data.

In a letter to the California Coastal Commission, the Center for Biological Diversity claimed that fracking fluids laced with dangerous chemicals are discharged into the ocean during the fracking process, and the commission should use its powers to halt offshore fracking because of the current "regulatory vacuum."

Yogi said the EPA issues permits to ensure that waste discharges from oil and gas operations do not "adversely impact water quality."