

Enviro Group Sues San Benito County To Stop Oil Exploration

Robert Parry

Citadel Exploration President and CEO Armen Nahabedian (left) and CFO Phil McPherson plan a 15-well exploratory oil project south of Pinnacles National Park.

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It's not just children's stories that employ huffing and puffing. It's also oil industry vernacular for a practice technically known as steam injection, in which steam is injected into an oil layer where it heats up solid oil deposits, allowing them to flow.

Less than 10 miles south of the newly designated Pinnacles National Park, [Citadel Exploration Inc. plans to use steam injection to drill up to 15 test wells](#) in search of untapped oil deposits.

But a lawsuit filed today in Monterey County Superior Court attempts to stop the project.

The suit challenges the San Benito County Board of Supervisors for approving the project, alleging they violated the California Environmental Quality Act. The suit also names Newport Beach-based Citadel Exploration.

Plaintiffs representing the nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity claim the county fell short on necessary environmental analysis. They call for a full-blown environmental impact report, rather than a shorter, less thorough declaration of environmental impacts.

"The county abused its discretion by failing to fully and properly describe the project and its environmental setting," the complaint states.

Among the items the nonprofit claims San Benito County and Citadel failed to fully evaluate: potential development of a more intensive industrial site, should the test wells come back with good results; total greenhouse gases produced; and potential impact to condor habitat.

In approving Citadel's permit, county officials required that a condor biologist be on site. To Kelly Sorenson, executive director of the Ventana Wildlife Society, that's an adequate protection for the endangered birds.

"What I think is most important is to have a condor biologist onsite who can work with the landowner and the operator to make sure there's no take on that species," he says. "[Oil drilling] has never killed a condor before."

Last month, the San Benito County Board of Supervisors [approved updated oil and gas regulations](#) that would strengthen the county's environmental controls on new projects.