



EPA to require S. Calif. offshore fracking reports

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LOS ANGELES (AP) — Oil and gas companies that are fracking off the Southern California coast must report chemicals discharged into the ocean under a new rule released Thursday by federal environmental regulators.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency published the requirement in the Federal Register, and it will become effective March 1.

The move comes after a series of stories by The Associated Press last year revealed at least a dozen offshore frack jobs in the Santa Barbara Channel, and more than 200 in nearshore waters overseen by the state of California.

Hydraulic fracturing, which involves pumping huge amounts of sand, water and chemicals deep underground to release oil, was conducted with no separate environmental analysis of the fracking chemicals on the sea surroundings, and little or no oversight.



FILE - In this May 1, 2009 file photo, offshore oil drilling platform 'Gail' operated by Venoco, Inc., is shown off the coast of Santa Barbara, Calif. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency published a new rule on Thursday, Jan. 9, 2014 requiring oil and gas companies to report chemicals discharged off the Southern California coast from hydraulic fracturing. The rule goes into effect on March 1, 2014. (AP Photo/Chris Carlson, File)

"This requirement was added in response to recent concerns regarding the potential effects of discharges of fluids used for offshore hydraulic fracturing operations," the EPA said in its notice.

The oil industry has insisted that fracking, which has been around for decades, does not harm the environment.

While attention has been focused on fracking on land close to communities, little is known about the practice in the ocean, which uses far less fracking fluids.

Well permits and emails obtained through the Freedom of Information Act show fracking has quietly occurred off Southern California since the late 1990s with mixed success.

After the AP stories were published, the California Coastal Commission launched an investigation. A group of state lawmakers also called on the federal government to look into the practice.

The largest offshore frack was completed in January 2010 by Venoco Inc., which targeted the Monterey Shale, home to one of the nation's largest deposits of shale oil.

"It did not produce the results we expected," Venoco spokeswoman Lisa Rivas said in an email Thursday.

Rivas said the company does not have plans to frack offshore in the future.

The new permit requirement applies only to work on nearly two dozen grandfathered-in platforms in federal waters off the Santa Barbara coast, site of a 1969 oil platform blowout that spilled more than 3 million gallons of crude oil, ruined miles of beaches and killed thousands of birds and other wildlife.

That spill led to a prohibition on new offshore platforms in federal waters off California, but companies used fracking and other techniques in an attempt to stimulate new production from old, existing wells.

Now, companies would have to report chemical concentrations and amount of fluids released into the Pacific. The EPA said offshore work elsewhere is not subject to the new requirement.

Separately, state oil regulators have drafted rules requiring companies to test groundwater and alert landowners before fracking or other well stimulation. Companies would also have to disclose the chemicals used and acquire

permits before a job on land or in the ocean. Those rules go into full effect in 2015.

The California Independent Petroleum Association did not respond to a message for comment. The Independent Oil Producers' Agency and the Western States Petroleum Association said none of their members use hydraulic fracturing technology in offshore federal waters.

Environmentalists called the latest development a step in the right direction, but they want the government to ban the practice.

"The EPA's rule will provide some information about the toxic fracking chemicals dumped into our ocean, but it relies on oil companies to be honest and transparent in their self-reporting," said Miyoko Sakashita, senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity.