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Mercury News editorial: California needs clear, strict fracking regulations

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The oil industry knows a thing or two about drilling deep to get results. Californians who care about water quality need to demand no less in state regulation of the practice of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking. The rules for pumping fluids into the ground to force out oil and natural gas need to be clear and strict, the practices all fully transparent.

This is not just the view of environmental idealists. A national figure in the energy industry with experience in oil extraction, PG&E CEO Anthony Earley sees it as an obvious need for California.

"I think we ought to be totally transparent about it," he told the Mercury News editorial board, commenting on fracking



FILE- This file photo taken April 12, 2005 shows the oil platform Gilda in federal waters in the Santa Barbara Channel off Ventura, Calif. (Steve Malone, Santa Barbara News-Press)

in a recent meeting. "I think we ought to have stringent drilling regulations so that everybody's comfortable."

That includes requiring companies to publicly disclose the chemicals they pump into the ground to break up the shale formations that hold the oil or gas, Earley said. He also believes groundwater should be tested before companies begin a fracking operation so that a baseline of water quality can be established.

Gov. Jerry Brown and the Legislature should heed Earley, if not the advocates of water and environmental protection who have been vocal from the start. The issue heated up this month when Californians learned oil companies have been fracking offshore to explore fragile seabeds for oil.

The powerful Western States Petroleum Association is fighting regulation. In the last six months alone, the oil industry spent more than any other lobbying group in California -- more than \$2.2 million -- and succeeded in killing nearly a dozen bills.

The exception is Sen. Fran Pavley's SB4, which passed the Senate and is scheduled for a hearing this month in the House. To get it this far, Pavley had to drop her call for a fracking moratorium until an independent study was completed in 2014. But her bill still requires the industry to pay for monitoring water quality and to disclose chemicals used in fracking. It requires 30-day notification of property owners before fracking could begin on or under their property.

Amazingly, Gov. Jerry Brown's preliminary draft rules would allow fracking under land without telling the owners and would not allow for appeals, among other lax provisions. The industry is lobbying him to veto Pavley's legislation if it passes. That would be a mistake.

A recent poll by the Public Policy Institute of California found a majority of residents oppose the increased use of fracking. Failure to regulate it fairly could prompt a ballot revolt.

Potential benefits of extracting oil from the rich Monterey Shale are enormous, for both national energy needs and California's economy. The approach Pavley and PG&E's Earley suggest is the right balance between protecting the environment and meeting energy needs.