

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS

Fracking protest: Local activists team up with national organization

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A group of activists sporting hazmat suits marched down Cabrillo Boulevard on Thursday in protest of hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking."

Organizers timed the demonstration to coincide with a three-day California Coastal Commission meeting taking place at the Santa Barbara Hyatt Hotel.

Protesters shouted their message, "Coastal Commission, you can fight back. Here is your mission - don't let them frack!"

Fracking is the technique of extracting oil and gas by pushing water and chemicals into the ground at high pressure, fracturing rock and allowing the oil or gas to be pumped more easily.

The Center for Biological Diversity, based in Tucson, Ariz., teamed up with the Santa Barbara County Water Guardians and several other environmental groups to urge the Coastal Commission to stop offshore oil fracking, as well to support a ballot initiative aimed at banning the practice on land in Santa Barbara County.

"There are currently over 2,500 active wells onshore (in Santa Barbara County), and many more in the pipeline," said Rebecca Claassen, a volunteer with the Santa Barbara Water Guardians. "We are trying to head off the expansion of these hazardous processes."



Fracking protesters gather Thursday at East Beach, led by Hillary Aidun on the bullhorn, for a march to the California Coastal Commission meeting at the Hyatt Santa Barbara. THOMAS KELSEY/NEWS-PRESS



Kathy McGuire, left, and Sally Hearon chant as they walk in front of the Hyatt Santa Barbara, where the California Coastal Commission is meeting. THOMAS KELSEY/NEWS-PRESS

Ms. Claassen said she and about 300 other volunteers with the SBWG are collecting signatures to place the initiative on the November ballot.

They need 13,201 signatures and have collected 3,000 in just three days, she said. The conservation groups believe fracking produces large amounts of waste contaminated with toxic chemicals that harm the environment and could cause cancer or other health risks.

Miyoko Sakashita, staff attorney for the Center of Biological Diversity, said oil companies have fracked hundreds of wells in both state and federal waters off the coast of California.

In federal waters, oil companies are allowed to dump more than 9 billion gallons of wastewater, including fracking fluid, into the ocean each year.

"You can see the oil rigs from shore, but the contaminated waters are hidden from view," said Ms. Sakashita. "We're very concerned that fracking poses a real risk to the Santa Barbara coast and all the wildlife that depends on it. Our goal is to make sure toxic fracking chemicals don't poison wildlife or end up in the food chain."

Ms. Claassen said not just wildlife is affected.

"Communities like ours are at imminent risk of contaminated water, air pollution, revenue losses in tourism and agriculture and huge increases in greenhouse gas emissions from unconventional oil extraction," she said.

The California Coastal Commission has been investigating the issue, and recently recommended an end to ocean discharges over concerns about the danger to California's coastal environment.

Members of the Center for Biological Diversity have been following the Coastal Commission hearings across the state, and organizing similar rallies with other local organizations to raise awareness about fracking.

"This is part of a growing movement across the state, from Butte County to the north, to here in Santa Barbara County," said Rose Braz, the climate campaign director with the Center for Biological Diversity. "Communities are saying 'We don't want to be exposed to these toxic chemicals.' We are looking to the governor to stop it at the state level, and to local leaders to stop it here, and to the California Coastal Commission to do its duty, which is to protect our coasts and oceans."

The Center for Biological Diversity also recently filed a legal petition urging the Environmental Protection Agency to stop oil and gas companies from dumping toxic chemicals produced during the fracking process directly into ocean waters.

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