

# Santa Cruz Sentinel

## Fracking stirs debate in San Benito County

Environmental activism rises as issue comes to forefront

By Jason Hoppin  
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In November, voters in San Benito County voters could go to the ballot on one of the first county-wide bans on fracking in California.

With a population of just 55,000, the county is one of the smallest in the state. But it already has become a vanguard in the debate over the controversial oil and gas extraction technique, thanks to a small band of opponents who are helping to change how the rest of the state sees their home.

“People are thinking about the future of water in their county and where their future is going,” said Andrew Hsia-Coron, one of the founders of the antifracking group San Benito Rising. “They’re not interested in an industrial zone.”

The 10-month-old group — whose name suggests the newly emboldened — was born of dissatisfaction with



Cars drive through the hills of Aromas. Talk of oil drilling in the area have upset some residents. (Kevin Johnson -- Santa Cruz Sentinel file)

local efforts to pass new gas and oil extraction rules. But what they found were signs that San Benito County — now seen as a political bellwether that leans Democratic — has changed.

“I was out at farms and ball-parks and the Post Office, just walking the streets and talking to folks. The folks that I talked to thought that fracking and other advanced

oil extraction techniques had no place in this county,” Hsia-Coron said.

San Benito County sits at the nexus of the Monterey Bay, Silicon Valley and the Salinas Valley. While farming is still the major industry, in recent years it been colonized by tech workers looking for cheaper housing, leading to a housing boom around Hollister.

Backers gathered more than 4,100 signatures, almost three times more than needed to get in on the ballot, with similar pushes in Hollister and San Juan Bautista. Tuesday, the county certified the signatures, triggering an upcoming decision by the county Board of Supervisors to adopt the ban outright, call an election or do a financial review of its impact.

Santa Cruz County is under a fracking moratorium, but the move is largely symbolic — the oil and gas industry does not see the county as having much fracking potential.

### **Monterey Shale**

Much of Southern San Benito County, however, sits atop the lucrative Monterey Shale formation, which may contain 15 billion barrels of crude oil, and if developed, could add as many as 2.8 million jobs, according to one recent USC study.

And the industry is mobilizing against the effort. It recently fired off a threatening letter to San Benito County, which strongly suggested a lawsuit over millions in lost revenues.

“A local regulation that attempts to impose a moratorium on or severely limit the use of hydraulic fracturing or

other forms of well stimulation, is preempted by state law and unenforceable, and most certainly would be challenged on such basis,” wrote Craig Moyer, a lawyer for the California Independent Petroleum Association.

Armen Nahabedian, president and CEO of Citadel Exploration, said his industry spends much of its time and money trying to improve extraction techniques and minimize environmental impacts. He pointed out 3,000 wells have been drilled in Monterey County’s San Ardo Oil Field, which surrounds the Salinas River.

“There’s never been an instance of water contamination, and \$4.1 billion in agriculture gets water from drainage that runs off the San Ardo Oil Field,” Nahabedian said. “To say that agriculture and the oil and gas industry can’t exist together is just a farce.”

### **Big oil lashes back**

Nahabedian said the effort would ban more extraction techniques than fracking, and his industry likely would fight any vote in court rather than at the ballot box. He added that while some mineral rights owners could become wealthy off oil — property rights and economic development have been big arguments against

the initiative — even the debate is bringing new development to a halt.

“In a fair world, these people would be dragged out into the courtyard and dealt with accordingly,” Nahabedian said. “These people are stirring up a lot of bad publicity and they’re causing some decisions to be made by using tactics of fear-mongering.”

San Benito Rising backers include Bonny Doon Vineyards’ Randall Grahm, who owns property outside San Juan Bautista, and Democrat Shawn Bagley, who is challenging Republican Anthony Cannella for his state Senate seat.

They also include people like Leti and Paul Hain, fourth-generation ranchers around the Tres Piños area. The Hains’ great-grandfather helped convince Teddy Roosevelt to set aside the area that became Pinnacles National Park.

“It’s bringing San Benito County into California politics,” Paul Hain said of the debate. “For years, we’ve kind of been on the southern edge of things and neglected, and all the sudden it’s getting real. It’s getting real because of the National Park, because we’re

connected to Silicon Valley, and we want people to come and enjoy and spend their money and go home. Fracking and steam extraction technology and things like that, in seismically active areas, it could destroy southern San Benito County.”

Hsia-Coron said he believes San Benito County’s future could lie in fusing its agricultural roots and environmental protection.

“I think it has an effect on people. I think people are wrapping their mind around the fact that the future of this community could be ecotourism,” Hsia-Coron said.

### **Grassroots effort**

San Benito Rising is not looking to Santa Cruz County or other hotbeds of environmental activism for inspiration. Rather it is looking to New York, where scores of local communities passed fracking bans with the help of lawyer Helen Slottje, who last week won a prestigious Goldman Environmental Foundation award. Those bans led to a statewide moratorium.

The state passed new fracking regulations last year, which largely failed to assuage environmentalists. A renewed effort at a statewide moratori-

um cleared a Senate committee Wednesday, and the Center for Biological Diversity recently sent a letter to Gov. Jerry Brown detailing what it said were more than 100 violations of fracking disclosure rules.

Though San Benito Rising turned to a top San Francisco environmental firm to write its proposed ban, their effort seems to be grassroots.

But the group is sharing its knowledge. Hsia-Coron said a Santa Barbara County group reached out for help, and is expected to gather enough signatures to put a fracking vote on the ballot there. Butte County voters are weighing a similar measure.

“We’re at the beginning of a healthy contagion in this county. There’s going to be three counties, possibly, on the ballot in November, and if this passes, we expect other counties to do it,” said Hsia-Coron.

He also expects to be the oil and gas industry’s opposition to be heavy and well-funded.

“They’re going to want to stomp on this bug,” he said.