



## California drought gives boost to anti-fracking movement

Amid perennial worries over dry conditions and seismic activity, environmentalists aim for tighter drilling regulation

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California is known for the twin threat of natural disasters from drought and earthquakes, with both phenomena certain to give many residents serious concern.

But there is one group that is starting to reap serendipitous marketing ammunition from the state's current historic drought and the ever-present worry of ground-shaking tremors: the anti-fracking movement.

"California faces two interlinked crises, a water crisis and a climate crisis, and fracking makes both of these problems worse," said Kassie Siegel, senior counsel for the Center for Biological Diversity, a nonprofit conservation group.

Fracking, or hydraulic fracturing — a method of high-pressure injection of substances to extract oil from rock formations — has become a hugely controversial subject across the United States. Defenders of the process, especially the oil and gas industry, hail it as a solution to



A pump jack in a field being developed for drilling next to a farm near Lost Hills, Calif. David McNew Getty Images

America's energy woes. Critics say it is highly pollutive and contributes to climate change at a time when the country should be moving away from fossil fuels.

But California's unique circumstances have led to a different twist on the debate over fracking wells. "They use an enormous amount of fresh water ... And fracking has been known to induce earthquakes," said Siegel.

Drought and quakes are bound to get every Californian to stand up and listen. The state is in its third year of drought, and water reserves are so low that this year is on track to be the worst in 500 years. At the same time, the southern part of the state has been shaken by several earthquakes in recent weeks, and the specter of the Big One looms large.

“Those injection wells, when put near faults, create and aggravate seismic activity,” said Kathryn Phillips, director of Sierra Club California. “In California, we’re starting to wonder. Is it being made worse?”

The anti-fracking lobby has pounced on the trigger words “drought” and “quake” in its campaign to ban the controversial process. The momentum has picked up statewide, although 95 percent of fracking in California is confined to rural Kern County, an oil-rich area that produces 60 percent of the state’s oil. Unlike the situation in the Northeast and Midwest of the U.S., all the fracking done in California is to drill for oil, not natural gas.

A bill proposing a statewide moratorium on fracking passed a Senate committee this week. In January, a state law that requires oil companies to obtain permits for fracking and to estimate how much water they’ll use took effect. State agencies are developing more comprehensive regulations, but many local governments are taking matters into their own hands.

Last month, the city of Carson in Los Angeles County imposed an emergency 45-day moratorium on all new drilling because of fears that Occidental Petroleum would use fracking to drill more than 200 wells near homes and a university.

And Los Angeles may become the nation’s largest city to approve a moratorium on the drilling practice. The City Council last month voted to direct the city attorney to draft an ordinance that would stop fracking in the city, but the council has yet to take a final vote. “In the last six to nine months, at least in California, the interest in and the advocacy around

[fracking] and the grassroots community engagement has just skyrocketed,” Phillips said.

Those in the energy industry are not impressed with arguments by the anti-fracking movement in the state. “They’re skilled at marketing, skilled at hyperbole,” said Rock Zierman, CEO of the California Independent Petroleum Association in Sacramento, a group that represents 550 companies and individuals in the oil industry. “We use less than a total 300 acre-feet of water a year for fracking. That’s equal to what all golf courses in California use in half a day.”

About a third of the 2,000 new oil wells in California are hydraulically fractured, he said. “They talk about air pollution from methane leaks,” Zierman said. “Our air [quality] laws established regional air districts that regulate all our service equipment, every joint, every coupling [that’s] permitted.”

The push for regulations heightened in the last three years after it was estimated that more than 15 billion barrels of oil are trapped in what is called the Monterey Shale, which stretches 1,750 square miles through the Central Valley.

Oil speculators have rushed to devise ways to extract this precious commodity buried as far down as 12,000 feet below the surface. And although they’re searching for cheaper ways, fracking and another controversial process called acidization may be the only ways so far. The rush for black gold has created some conflicts with farmers who want to keep farming rather than sell drilling rights, but it’s welcomed by others who stand to make a big profit.

“Fracking has been going on for the last 50 to 60 years,” said Les Clark, executive vice president of the Independent Oil Producers Agency in Bakersfield. “Anytime you’re dealing with environmental groups, they’re opposed to everything you do ... Bottom line: It’s an attempt to stop all fossil fuel development.”

The proposed statewide moratorium protects most ongoing fracking operations, but a drill site goes through the process only three to five times before it starts all over again at a new site. If enacted, the bill would have its greatest impact on new wells.

“If you think about the drought we’re experiencing now, it’s the first, most overt sign of impact of climate disruption and dependence on carbon fuels,” Phillips said. “We knew Mother Nature was going to send us some signals soon. The irony here is that we’re going to be using a very limited resource that is even more limited because the drought is linked to dependence on carbon fuels.”