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Oil waste doesn't belong in California's water supply



A private property sign hangs on the fence of a shut down injection well located next to an almond orchard owned by Palla Farms, Thursday, Jan. 15, 2015, in Bakersfield, Calif. Palla Farms filed suite blaming several oil companies for contaminating the local groundwater and killing cherry trees. (AP Photo/Jae C. Hong)

By The San Francisco Chronicle

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It's time to stop temporizing about a bureaucratic foul-up that threatens underwater water supplies across a swath of California's oil fields. Two environmental groups are going to court, demanding Sacramento ban the practice of pumping drilling wastes into the earth where the fluids can taint drinking supplies.

In a drought-damaged state, the situation is mind boggling. Due to a mix up, federal and state authorities have allowed oil firms to inject left over drilling run-off back underground to get rid of it. When the problem was finally noticed, the state moved to shut down 23 injection wells but allowed hundreds more to operate for another two years while health studies are done.

The well sites are dotted across some of the state's driest counties along the Central Coast and in Central Valley. Once underground, the brackish fluids, which may also carry harmful chemicals, could filter into vast aquifers that supply well water for farms and cities.

State officials claim tests so far have shown no health risks. But it's hardly reassuring when the same group failed to provide genuine oversight and allowed oil field disposal with little regard for years.

The state must be pressured to do more, especially as California's water crisis deepens and parched communities reach ever wider and deeper for new supplies.

This urgency lies behind a lawsuit brought by the Sierra Club and the Center for Biological Diversity. These groups, represented by the Earthjustice legal group, are asking for an immediate halt in waste injections. Its a much tougher course of action than the state's decision to allow the practice to continue while safety studies play out.

These groups claim the state Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources is breaking clean-water laws by not stopping the injection wells. Looking for trouble spots and tainted water isn't good enough when the practice of pumping briny, chemically-laced fluids back into the ground is so risky.

The suit and its claims deserve attention and thought. California's oilfield regulators stumbled badly in permitting the practice. If these overseers aren't up to protecting the state, then the courts must step in to safeguard the state's shrinking water supply.

See the full article here: <http://www.sfgate.com/opinion/editorials/article/Oil-waste-doesn-t-belong-in-California-s-6256472.php>