

THE SACRAMENTO BEE

Oil industry's toxic wastewater threatens California water



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Photo Jae C. Hong The Associated Press

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It's California's other water problem – and, like the drought, it poses a profound threat to our future. Every year the state's oil industry produces some 130 billion gallons of wastewater. But where do oil companies put this dirty fluid, and how dangerous is it to human health?

We got some answers recently, and they raise troubling new questions about Gov. Jerry Brown's support for fracking and his administration's failure to protect California's water from oil industry pollution.

Newly revealed documents and media investigations show that state regulators allowed the oil industry to drill more than 2,400 illegal injection wells for wastewater disposal or oil production into protected California aquifers, including some with water clean enough to drink or irrigate crops.

These illegal injection wells are scattered across the state, from central Monterey County down to Kern and Los Angeles counties.

A handful were shut down last summer. But many others, state officials now admit, are still shooting oil industry wastewater into underground water resources that should be protected. That violates state law and the federal Safe Drinking Water Act.

The bad news doesn't stop with injection wells. The oil industry also dumps wastewater into open pits – and Central Valley water officials recently revealed that at least 383 of these sumps lack permits or oversight. Most wastewater pits are unlined and uncovered, so they can leak into the ground and emit dangerous air pollution.

Finally, my organization analyzed hundreds of tests done by oil companies and found that flowback fluid from fracked wells in California contains benzene at levels as high as 1,500 times the federal limits for drinking water.

Average benzene levels were about 700 times the federal limit for drinking water, and 98 percent of operators who bothered to test for benzene found a level over the limit. Cancer-causing chromium-6 was also present in fracking flowback at levels up to 2,700 times the recommended limit set by the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment.

Fracking flowback fluid, it's important to note, is commonly dumped down waste injection wells like those revealed to be illegally dumping into protected aquifers with drinkable water.

Up to half of all new wells in California are fracked, according to the California Council on Science and Technology. As fracking expands, so will the oil industry's toxic wastewater problem.

How are public officials responding to this cascade of disturbing news?

The Central Valley Regional Water Quality Control Board plans to take up to two years to inspect and begin regulating the vast number of unpermitted wastewater pits. The board refuses to ban this inherently dangerous form of wastewater disposal.

State oil regulators, meanwhile, want to slowly phase out the industry's use of illegal wastewater injection wells. The Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources proposes to let most illegal oil industry injection wells continue operating in protected aquifers until 2017.

Oil officials will also seek exemptions for many affected aquifers, which would give oil companies free rein to

further contaminate these water resources.

To justify this outrageously slow and inadequate response, state officials are even distorting history.

State oil supervisor Steve Bohlen claims the illegal underground injection problem developed over decades and can't be solved overnight. But an Associated Press analysis found that 46 percent of these illegal wells were permitted or began injection in the past four years – under Gov. Brown, who fired two officials in 2011 for not approving underground injection permits quickly enough to suit oil companies.

As California grapples with a devastating drought, Gov. Brown needs to face facts. Our water-starved state can't afford to let the oil industry use our aquifers as garbage dumps.

Gov. Brown should take emergency action to shut down every illegal injection well and illegal waste disposal pit immediately to avoid further damage to our precious water supplies.

And given the disturbing news that fracking produces vast quantities of flowback fluid full of cancer-causing chemicals, the governor must also rethink his position on fracking. The best way to protect California's water from contaminated fracking wastewater is to ban this inherently dangerous practice.

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