



Fracking poses little risk of air and water pollution, report finds; BLM to restart oil and gas leases

Molly Peterson
August 29 2014

The Bureau of Land Management has announced plans to resume oil and gas leasing for fracking in California at the same time it has released an independently produced report finding that current fracking methods aren't fouling air and water and don't raise the risk of earthquakes in the state.

The California Council on Science and Technology, with researchers from the Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory and the Pacific Institute, drafted the independent technical study for the BLM after a lawsuit filed by environmental groups alleged the agency did not know the risks of fracking in the state. The suit was filed in 2012 by the Center for Biological Diversity and the Sierra Club.

Last year, the BLM suspended auctions for oil and gas leases. The CCST's report moves the



An independent study commissioned by the BLM has found little present and direct risk to the environment in California as a result of fracking. The report's being criticized by environmental groups. Its authors admit data about the practice is limited. David McNew/Getty Images

federal government closer to reopening lease auctions in California; the next step is an environmental review, which will incorporate the report's findings.

The reports authors surveyed publicly available peer-reviewed studies, as well as other studies that met scientific standards. "This report provides the most objective, up-to-date, peer-reviewed assessment available to inform thoughtful policy making in California, while also characterizing issues that require further study," said CCST Executive Director Dr. Susan Hackwood, in a written release.

The team found that while oil and gas producers in California use less water than other jurisdictions for fracking, well stimulation activities tend to use higher concentrations of chemicals.

Still, the CCST report describes the potential for water pollution from fracking as low. A survey of publicly available data found no public reports of fracking fluids released into drinkable groundwater in California. The study's authors warn that fracking may pose more significant risks in the Central Valley, where water for irrigation could become contaminated by injection wells.

The report said that, based on current data, most fracking chemicals pose little risk to people exposed to them in small amounts. But the report acknowledged that not much is known about the effects from chronic exposure to the chemicals.

The BLM manages 15 million acres of land in California, and just under 50 million acres of subsurface mineral rights. In 2013, the bureau reported 5,450 wells on 629 leases, producing more than 27 billion barrels of oil and gas combined throughout the state. Few, if any, of those acres are in the Los Angeles Basin.

Still, authors of the CCST report said it's likely to influence the state's own independent scientific study, required under state law, which is expected out later this year.

According to the U.S. Geological Survey, another 3.2 billion barrels of oil in the Los Angeles Basin may be available using existing oil extraction technology.

The new report suggests that it's unlikely that acidizing — a controversial form of fracking — will become common in producing oil and gas in the region, given its geology.

But that claim's already drawn criticism from the Center for Biological Diversity. The group points out that data collected by the South Coast Air Quality Management District over the past year reveals hundreds of acid jobs in the L.A. Basin in recent months, including the use of acid in maintaining the well.

The South Coast AQMD's database also tracks the use of air toxics in well stimulation activities.

CBD's Kassie Siegel criticized the report, which relied in part on short-term and self-reported data about well stimulation practices. And she criticized the BLM's announcement that it intended to re-start auctions for oil and gas leases for coming on the same day. "How can we count on a fair and unbiased process for evaluating the decision to resume leasing when the head of California BLM has predetermined the outcome?" she said, in a written statement. "First we get the verdict, and then we get the trial."

The president of the industry-lobbyist group Western States Petroleum Association, Cathy Reheis Boyd, released a statement that WSPA is still reviewing the new report. But Reheis Boyd sounded a cautious yet approving note about the study, adding that it "should serve as a useful reference as the California Natural Resources Agency moves forward."