

# Santa Cruz becomes first California county to ban fracking

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Tue May 20, 2014

May 20 (Reuters) - Santa Cruz on Tuesday became the first California county to ban fracking, the latest in a string of moves by local governments in the state to take a stand against the controversial oil and gas producing method.

Fracking, or hydraulic fracturing, relies on injecting water, sand and some chemicals deep beneath the earth's surface to break up rock and free up oil and gas trapped below.

Environmentalists say the chemicals used in the process can pollute underground water supplies and cause other damage.

The scenic county of Santa Cruz does not have any oil or gas production, but advocates said momentum for a ban took shape after reports surfaced saying that

oil companies were exploring the possibility of fracking in neighboring San Benito county.

The ban is also intended to pressure California Governor Jerry Brown into agreeing to put a halt to the practice in the state, a step he refused to take in the last legislative session.

Brown has said he supports fracking because he believes it is better for the state to produce its own crude oil than rely on imports.

"While Governor Brown refuses to protect our health and environment from fracking risks, local communities across the state are moving forward with measures to fight oil industry pollution," said Rose Braz of the Center for Biological Diversity.

An oil industry representative on Tuesday played down the significance of the Santa Cruz vote, calling it "symbolic."

"Activists are going around the state pursuing total bans on oil and gas development under the guise of wanting to ban fracking, but in places where people earn their livings responsibly producing our oil and gas resources, this strategy won't work," said Dave Quast, California director of Energy In Depth, an oil industry-backed group.

Fracking has emerged as a top environmental issue in California. Its Monterey Shale formation contains an estimated 15 billion barrels of hard-to-reach oil, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

The action in Santa Cruz follows a vote earlier this month by city leaders in Beverly Hills to ban fracking, making it the first municipality in the state to prohibit the practice.

Los Angeles and Culver City are considering bans on fracking as well.

Last month, the city council in Carson, California, declined to extend a temporary moratorium on fracking and other extraction practices. Occidental Petroleum is looking to drill more than 200 new wells in the Southern California city, although it denies it will frack or use acid to stimulate those wells.