



Miyoko Sakashita: U.S. not protecting us from offshore fracking

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Miyoko Sakashita is oceans director at the Center for Biological Diversity.

They support an amazing array of life, from abalone and sea otters to bottlenose dolphins and blue whales. Even humans depend on them far more than we realize.

Our oceans matter. But a dangerous activity beneath the waves threatens our amazing marine ecosystems and the seaside communities they support.

Off California's coast, oil companies are fracking offshore wells, blasting huge amounts of water and dangerous chemicals into the earth at enormous pressures to crack rock formations beneath the ocean floor.

On two oil platforms just a few miles from Ventura, the Interior Department has approved at least four recent fracks. Oil companies even have federal permission to annually dump up to 9 billion gallons of wastewater, including fracking chemicals, into the wildlife-rich waters of the Santa Barbara Channel.

That's why my organization — the Center for Biological Diversity — is fighting back. We just notified the federal government of our intent to sue if it doesn't stop rubber-stamping

offshore fracking without analyzing the environmental threats of this dangerous activity. The Golden State isn't the only place at risk, of course. Offshore fracking is increasingly common in the Gulf of Mexico. And the practice may spread to the Atlantic, given the Obama administration's recent decision to open offshore waters from Delaware to Florida to oil exploration.

But it's especially disturbing that offshore fracking is occurring near the site of one of the largest oil spills in U.S. waters in history — the 1969 oil spill in the Santa Barbara Channel.

Like the Deepwater Horizon spill of 2010 in the Gulf, the Santa Barbara catastrophe illustrated the enormous risks of offshore oil activities, especially when they are poorly regulated. Yet, federal officials are authorizing fracking near Ventura and elsewhere in the Santa Barbara Channel with next to no oversight.

The Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement — one of the agencies with regulatory authority over offshore oil activity in federal waters — is supposed to ensure that drilling operations are safe.

Because of the dangerous chemicals and enormous pressures involved, fracking really has

no place in fragile ocean environments. But instead of prohibiting fracking, federal officials are rubber-stamping permits for this hazardous practice.

Federal officials can't even say how often fracking has happened in off California's coast. But we do know they've approved at least 21 fracks in the Santa Barbara Channel with no analysis of the environmental risks, no consultation with the California Coastal Commission, and no input from people living in Ventura and other coastal communities.

We still don't know the full range of threats from offshore fracking because the oil industry has resisted requirements to disclose all the chemicals used in fracking.

But one peer-reviewed study found that up to 25 percent of fracking chemicals could cause cancer. Scientists with my organization found that at least 10 chemicals routinely used in offshore fracking in California could kill or harm many marine species, including sea otters.

Offshore fracking also emits hazardous air pollutants, including volatile organic compounds that can harm the heart and lungs. Exposure to airborne benzene — a carcinogen — has been documented in people living within 10 miles of fracked wells in Colorado, raising concerns about coastal communities near offshore platforms.

Fracking also dangerously extends the life of aging oil platforms and wells. Combined with the enormous pressures used in fracking, that raises concerns about increased risk of another accident like the 1969 spill, which oiled beaches from Santa Barbara to San Diego.

Bold action is needed to protect our marine wildlife, our beautiful beaches and our coastal communities. The federal government has no right to turn a blind eye to offshore fracking — or to keep Californians in the dark about this dangerous activity off our coast.