

Law to Keep Fracking Outta Compton Challenged by Oil Industry

By Mary Emily O'Hara
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The city of Compton in Los Angeles County has been synonymous with gangsta rap since N.W.A.'s groundbreaking Straight Outta Compton album in 1988, but it's now also famous for a steadfast opposition to fracking.

This week, Compton was hit with a lawsuit by the Western States Petroleum Association, a mega-bloc of some of the most powerful oil and gas companies in the nation. Although Santa Cruz and Beverly Hills both voted in fracking bans this May, only Compton's ban (which passed on April 22) is being challenged by the industry in court.

Fracking, or hydraulic fracturing, is a method of natural gas extraction in which a mixture of water, chemicals, and sand is injected with high pressure into deep underground rock formations like shale. The rock is then broken up into fractures, which fill with natural gas or petroleum.

Exxon Mobil's CEO says no to fracking... near his Texas ranch. [Read more here.](#)

[Environmentalists and residents of areas near fracking wells oppose the method because of its potential to pollute groundwater and air.](#)

[But opposition in California is also concerned with one of fracking's other suspected dangers: inciting earthquakes.](#)

[This March, the Center for Biological Diversity, Clean Water Action, and Earthworks co-published a report titled "On Shaky Ground: How Oil Companies Increase California's Earthquake Risk." The paper found that over half of California's active wastewater wells \(where fracking chemicals are dumped after use\) are within 10 miles of the San Andreas fault.](#)

[Kassie Siegel, director of Center for Biological Diversity's Climate Law Institute, told VICE News that scientists have proven that wastewater injection heightens the likelihood of earthquakes.](#)

["It increases earthquake risk in our seismically active state and puts millions of people at risk," Siegel said. "It's completely unsafe and unacceptable for this to be going on."](#)

After large earthquakes hit Oklahoma and Colorado in 2011, scientists began to suspect that they were induced by nearby fracking operations. In May, the Seismological Society of America held a press conference to warn the public that there's no way to predict which fracking wells will cause tremors.

Compton sits on top of the Avalon-Compton fault, but the massive San Andreas fault — a rupture of which caused the 1906 San Francisco quake that leveled the city — passes just to the east of Los Angeles County.

New York's silent but deadly fracking problem. Read more here.

The Western States complaint alleges that Compton's ordinance is unconstitutional because it bans fracking outside of the city limits under the stipulation that any oil or gas wells nearby would "bottom out" in its city. Basically, Compton doesn't want any fracking-related pollution coming its way — and Western States claims that the city doesn't have the right to try and avoid it.

The Compton ban is an ordinance imposing a moratorium on fracking "from any surface location in the city or from any site outside the city limits where the subsurface bottom hole is located in the city." By using such specific language, Compton essentially laid claim not only to its land boundaries on the surface, but also to the miles and miles of rock and gas deposits underneath the city.

So why sue only Compton? After all, not only have other California cities banned fracking, several more are hopping on the bandwagon. Santa Barbara and San Benito counties just approved November ballot measures to ban the controversial method, and Los Angeles is currently drafting a permanent ordinance after the city council temporarily banned fracking earlier this year.

Wasting water in California will now cost you \$500. Read more here.

A spokesperson for Western States told VICE News the company filed the suit "on behalf of its members who own mineral rights or currently produce oil and natural gas in or near the City of Compton."

It's the in or near part that defines the legal battle: Western States says Compton has no authority to regulate activities outside of the city limits. But far from being arbitrary, Compton's ban on nearby fracking came as a response to a huge drilling project proposed in the neighboring town of Carson. Carson imposed a complete moratorium in March in response to the project, but it expired after just 45 days.

VICE News spoke with Carson resident Dianne Thomas, who has been working with the Carson Coalition to drive fracking from her city. She's fighting Occidental Petroleum Corporation, which proposed opening over 200 fracking wells to be built on the Carson-Compton border over the next ten years. The wells would also be less than two miles from Thomas's house.

"Compton is aware of the struggle we're under," Thomas said. "At our city council, someone announced that if we don't pass it here, they'll just go to Compton and drill there. But they don't really need to be in Compton to affect Compton, because of the slant drilling."

Slant, or directional, drilling is a method of drilling horizontally underground to maximize shale access. But it's also been criticized as the method most likely to pollute groundwater and cause toxic air emissions.

“If you’re going to be in Carson, you’re going to spill over into Compton — and you don’t need permission to be there,” Thomas said, explaining why Compton’s ban includes nearby fracking operations that would “spill” into its city limits.

The strange case of Pictou County, Nova Scotia — a community supported by toxic mills. [Read more here.](#)

As in Compton, the majority of Carson residents are African-American or Hispanic. Those are the kinds of South LA neighborhoods that have reported the worst effects of fracking pollution.

After years of trying to bring the government’s attention to the mysterious nosebleeds, nausea, and other illnesses affecting the community, residents of a housing project near one oil production site invited Environmental Protection Agency agents to come see for themselves how toxic the area had become. The investigators became sick almost immediately upon arrival, and this January the EPA cited AllenCo Energy for violations of the clean air and water acts.

A statewide bill proposed by State Senators Holly Mitchell (D-Los Angeles) and Mark Leno (D-San Francisco) would impose a moratorium on fracking throughout California. But the legislation, SB 1132, has repeatedly failed to pass the Senate.

When the bill failed, Senator Mitchell called out the oil and gas industry for racism.

“When the impacts on the public of a for-profit endeavor are unknown, we try it out first in minority neighborhoods — assuming low vigilance and the need to bring in jobs makes safety irrelevant,” Mitchell said in a May 30 statement. “But we’ve put big industry on notice: That ploy won’t fly forever. People’s neighborhoods aren’t fodder for fracking.”

But the oil and gas industry is pouring lots of money into the fight. After the California Senate voted down SB 1132 in late May, the nonpartisan financial research group Map-Light revealed that senators who opposed the bill had received an average of \$24,981 each in campaign contributions from the industry. The bill stalled at a 16-16 vote because eight Democrats abstained. According to Map-Light, these Democrats took over four times as much oil and gas money as Democrats who voted in support of the bill.

One oft-quoted group, Californians for Energy Independence, purports to be a citizen’s activist coalition that is pro-fracking. But the website Follow the Money exposed the group as a front for the oil and gas industry: Californians for Energy Independence received 96 percent of its funding from four energy companies, totaling over \$22 million.

A whopping \$18 million of Californians for Energy Independence funding came from one company: Clean Energy Fuels Corp. of Seal Beach, California.

Despite the seemingly endless piles of cash being spent, anti-fracking advocates think the oil and gas companies are fighting a losing battle.

“In New York, the oil industry threw everything they had at fracking bans and they went to the highest court in the state, but they still lost,” Siegel told VICE News. “Even if [Western States] wins the lawsuit, Compton will just look at it as a fix-it ticket and go back and adjust the ordinance. They’ll still be able to ban fracking.”