Regulators Butt Heads With Activists Over Assessment of Offshore Fracking Hazards

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For the first time, federal regulators have prepared and made public a formal assessment of the potential environmental hazards posed by the use of hydraulic and acid fracturing, or "fracking," technology in offshore oil and gas wells off the coast of California.

To the dismay of environmentalists, the draft assessment proposes to forgo new restrictions on offshore fracking and any changes the permitting process.

The document also explains how offshore fracking technology works, and its potential impacts on marine environments in and around the Santa Barbara Channel, addressing the disposal of contaminated wastewater, the potential for accidents and spills, and the risk of inducing undersea earthquakes. Offshore fracking opponents quickly declared the assessment inadequate.

Regulators in the offshore drilling subdivisions of the Interior Department released the draft on Friday, just three weeks after reaching legal settlements with two environmental groups. The groups sued the agencies last year, arguing that under federal law regulators should have prepared a formal environmental assessment before signing off on permit modifications that allowed several offshore fracking jobs in recent years.

The agencies did not admit to any wrongdoing as part of the settlements, but agreed to finalize an environmental assessment by May 28 and put a temporary moratorium on new offshore fracking permits in the meantime.

The draft assessment is subject to public comment and is largely a response to concerns raised by environmental activists in the media. It concludes that the there is a "low probability" that offshore fracking will cause spills or other accidents, and fracking wastewater dumped into the ocean from some drilling platforms along with other wastewaters would cause a "slight localized reduction in water quality" and "subtle toxic effects in some species."

There are active seismic faults that are capable of causing earthquakes and tsunamis in areas where offshore drilling occurs, and recent reports have linked onshore fracking wastewater injection wells to earthquakes in California and other states. In their assessment, however, the regulators plan to keep fracking operations at least 1,000 feet away from active faults and other wells to avoid undersea tremors and quakes, so the potential for "induced seismicity" is low.

The Center for Biological Diversity, one of the two groups that sued the agencies over offshore fracking, called the draft assessment "inadequate," and an apparent attempt to lift the moratorium quickly without much consideration for environmental risks.

"Federal officials' meager analysis shows the government has failed to take the legally required hard look at the environmental threats of this dirty and dangerous practice," said Kirsten Monsell, an attorney for the Center. "Any reasonable evaluation would reveal that offshore fracking is just too big a risk to our ocean's life-support systems."

Getting More Oil With Hydro and Acid Fracks

The draft assessment reviews three types of techniques used to stimulate oil production where traditional drilling methods fall short: hydraulic fracturing, acid fracturing and "acid matrix." Most of the 23 drilling platforms in federally controlled waters off the California coast have been in operation three decades or more, and these technologies are typically used to enhance production in old wells where much of the crude has already been extracted and the remaining oil is under low pressure.

If regulators did not lift the moratorium on offshore fracking, then oil production in some wells would decline more quickly, according to the assessment, which considers a permanent moratorium as an alternative to the proposal to allow offshore fracking without new restrictions. Such a move would certainly be met with fierce opposition from the industry.

Hydraulic fracturing involves injecting seawater mixed with chemicals and sand at high pressure to fracture rock formations, allowing more oil or gas to flow out. Acid fracturing is similar, but instead of relying on bits of sand or "proppant" to keep cracks in the rock open, hydrochloric or hydrofluoric acid is used to "etch" channels in rock walls of the fractures, creating pathways for oil and gas. Acid matrix is the application of acids to dissolve rock formations into mud and release oil and gas.

Environmentalists Challenge Wastewater Dumping

Regulators and the industry say the fracking and acidizing technology is relatively safe and often smaller in scale than the onshore fracking techniques that sparked a national controversy and an oil and gas rush that recently stalled due to plummeting fuel prices.

Environmentalists, however, have opposed offshore fracking since a 2013 Truthout investigation revealed that federal regulators had approved several frack jobs in the Santa Barbara Channel with permit modifications that were "categorically excluded" from formal environmental reviews like the draft assessment released like week.

"Under this proposal, the oil industry would even be allowed to go back to dumping fracking chemicals mixed with wastewater into the wildlife-rich waters of the Santa Barbara Channel," said Monsell, who called offshore fracking a "toxic threat."

The Center's own analysis found that 10 chemicals commonly used in fracking could harm or kill marine wildlife such as sea otters and fish, and in 2014 the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) issued a rule while under pressure from activists requiring offshore frackers to disclose the fracking chemicals they dump overboard.

Some platforms mix fracking wastewater with other drilling wastewater, process the mixture and then dump it into the ocean or inject it into old wells under the sea floor. Overboard dumping degrades water quality within about 100 meters of the platform, and chemicals in the wastewater may have "subtle" toxic effects on some species, according to the assessment.

The assessment admits, however, that that there is a "lack of toxicity data" for some chemicals in fracking wastewater, but concludes that diluting the fracking wastes with wastewater and then ocean water would keep impacts on marine organisms to a minimum. The EPA's reporting requirement will help regulators monitor impacts.

In general, offshore drilling produces more wastewater than oil, and the federal government allows the industry to dump 9 billion gallons of treated wastewater into the Pacific Ocean every year.

The draft lays out three alternatives to its proposal to allow offshore fracking to continue without any new restrictions. One alternative would ban fracking in wells less than 2,000 feet below the seafloor to prevent oil and gas from leaking up into the ocean, and another would ban the overboard dumping of fracking wastewater, although this may lead the industry to disturb the environment by drilling new injection wells. A third would put an end to fracking in federal Pacific waters all together.

The public has until March 23 to submit comments on the draft proposal.