



California Pledges To Eventually Stop Letting Oil Companies Dump Waste Into Its Water Sources



Pumpjacks operate at the Kern River Oil Field, Friday, Jan. 16, 2015, in Bakersfield, Calif. California regulators authorized oil companies more than 2,500 times to inject wastewater and other production related fluids into federally protected aquifers potentially suitable for drinking and watering crops in the nation's agricultural center, state records show.

by Emily Atkin
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The plan, which still must be approved by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, also says that oil companies must stop injecting waste into lower-quality, but still drinkable aquifers by Feb. 15, 2017. Because oil companies have been injecting their wastewater into drinkable water sources for years, the state Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources also pledged to review all the drinking water wells at risk of contamination.

The proposed changes come in response to a report from the San Francisco Chronicle last week which showed that California regulators gave oil companies permits for at least 171 wastewater injection wells into clean aquifers, and 253 wastewater wells into aquifers that were salty but potentially usable

with treatment. The revelation drew considerable outrage because of California's epic, ongoing four-year drought, which has forced restrictions on water usage and availability across the state.

"It is shocking," Patrick Sullivan, a spokesperson for the Center for Biological Diversity, told ThinkProgress last week. "It is beyond belief."

In addition to drought outrage, drinking water contamination issues have also been raised. Wastewater from oil and gas drilling can contain chemicals like arsenic and benzene, heavy metals, and radioactive material. The average presence of benzene, a human carcinogen, in drilling wastewater is at levels 700 times higher than federal standards allow, according to data culled by the Center for Biological Diversity this week.

The state has not yet uncovered any instances of sullied drinking water, though at least one expert told the Associated Press that it could take years for contamination to show up.

"The problem with just monitoring [for contaminants] is once you see it in the well, it's too late," Timothy Parker, a groundwater expert who has worked for California's Department of Water Resources told the AP. "It's very difficult to clean up an aquifer once it's contaminated."

As for the state's plan to remedy the situation, environmentalists haven't been thrilled. They cite the time frame as inexcusable, advocating that injections of waste into any possible drinking water source should stop immediately.

"Thousands of illegal oil wells are injecting into California aquifers that should have been protected. We don't need a phase-out or new aquifer exemptions," said the Center for Biological Diversity's Kassie Siegel in a statement. "We're suffering the worst drought in recorded history. We need Gov. Brown to immediately halt the ongoing illegal activities."

State and federal regulators, however, have told the Chronicle that the time frame is necessary — that oil companies will need time to comply with the changes to their regulations.

"This is a problem that we worked ourselves into over 30 years," California oil division supervisor Steven Bohlen said, "and it's not a problem that can be solved in a year."