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EPA Urged to Reject California Plan to Dump Oil Waste Into Underground Water



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Last week the Center for Biological Diversity sent a letter to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) asking the agency to deny a proposal by California oil officials to turn underground water in the Price Canyon area of San Luis Obispo County into a permanent disposal site for oil wastewater.

The state's Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources submitted the exemption application to federal officials earlier this month. If the EPA approves the plan to exempt the aquifer from Safe Drinking Water Act protec-

tions, oil company Freeport-McMoRan could move forward with plans to drill hundreds of new oil wells in the area.

The letter to the EPA argues that the state of California has not taken into account nearby drinking water supplies and allowing waste water injection could contaminate those supplies.

“California officials can’t even map this aquifer consistently, let alone justify turning this underground water into a garbage dump for oil waste,” said Maya Golden-Krasner, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity.

“The EPA must protect the water supplies of people living near this oil field. The errors and inconsistencies in this disturbingly shoddy proposal highlight how little effort California regulators put into verifying the oil industry’s self-serving claims about this aquifer.”

An Associated Press report last year found that California regulators “have authorized oil companies to inject production fluids and waste into what are now federally protected aquifers more than 2,500 times.”

The report also found that nearly half of those permits were granted in the last four years by the administration of current Governor Jerry Brown.

As California enters the fifth year of the worst drought in the state’s history it would seem foolish to endanger remaining clean water supplies but that is exactly what is proposed.

“California’s water shortages aren’t going away, and we need to protect every drop from oil industry pollution,” Golden-Krasner said. “The EPA needs to slap down the Brown administration’s profoundly irresponsible effort to give away our precious water supplies.”

One of the risks of injecting wastewater near drinking water supplies was explained to the Associated Press by Timothy Parker, an independent Sacramento-based groundwater expert who has worked for the state Department of Water Resources:

“The problem with just monitoring (for contaminants) is once you see it in the well, it’s too late.”

Price Canyon-area residents are deeply concerned with the potential for contamination.

“State regulators have really let us down, so my neighbors and I are counting on the federal government to protect our water from pollution risks,” said Natalie Risner, who lives about a mile from the Arroyo Grande oilfield. “Our water wells are so important to us, but this is an issue that should matter to every person in California. We just can’t afford to let the oil industry endanger our dwindling water supplies.”

Unfortunately, there are many examples of how California regulators provide lax or no oversight of the oil and gas industry — the recent Aliso Canyon methane leak being one stark reminder.

There also is the fact that Governor Brown fired two oil regulators for warning against the governor’s recommendations to “bypass safety provisions of the federal Safe Drinking Water Act” to expedite oil drilling permits.

Knowing the track record of California oil and gas regulation — it is clear that the EPA needs to address this issue before it is too late.