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Federal Agencies Find That Fracking In The Pacific Would Have No ‘Significant’ Environmental Impacts

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The debate over fracking in California is about to get even more heated, following a report from two federal agencies that found that fracking for oil and gas in the ocean — known as offshore fracking — is unlikely to have a “significant” impact on the environment.

On Friday, both the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management (BOEM) and the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE) jointly released an environmental study that looked at the impact of hydraulic fracturing — or fracking — on marine ecosystems. The report analyzed 23 offshore fracking operations that operated in California between 1982 and 2014, and found that the operations have a minimal impact on the quality of water and ocean health. To the fossil fuel industry, this signals a return to normalcy, as both the BOEM and BSEE will resume approval of offshore fracking permits that they had temporarily suspended while the environmental study was being conducted.

But for environmental groups, the report is a troubling development.

According to the Center for Biological Diversity, oil companies have fracked at least 200 wells off the coast of California — and opponents of fracking worry that these operations could be putting both California wildlife, and California residents, at risk.

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“I think it’s just absurd that the agency could look at the environmental of offshore fracking and make a finding that there is no significant environmental impact,” Miyoko Sakashita, oceans director for the Center for Biological Diversity, told ThinkProgress.

According to Sakashita, fracking companies are currently allowed to discharge 9 billion gallons of wastewater into the ocean each year — and that waste water can include toxic chemicals. There is no limit for the amount of chemicals that companies can discharge into the ocean, and companies are not required to disclose which chemicals they use in their operations.

Environmentalists worry that those chemicals could disrupt sensitive marine ecosystems and threaten ocean health. Nineteen of the 23 existing Pacific offshore fracking platforms in the Pacific are located in the Santa Barbara Channel, which is home to a wealth of marine life, including dolphins, sea lions, and Pacific grey whales. The coast of the Santa Barbara Channel was hit with a massive oil spill last year when a pipeline carrying crude from offshore platforms — some of which also had fracking operations — ruptured, spilling more than 105,000 gallons of crude oil along the beach.

A Center for Biological Diversity investigation into chemicals used in California's offshore fracking operations found that at least 10 of the chemicals routinely used in fracking could be lethal to marine animals. Some of the chemicals have also been shown to break down into nonylphenol, a toxic substance that can lead to intersex fish species and bioaccumulate in animals further up the food chain, like in already-threatened sea otters.

Beyond chemicals, opponents of offshore fracking also point to an increase in seismic activity around fracking operations, and worry that in fault-riddled California, fracking could greatly increase the risk of earthquakes. Fracking operators often dispose of the large amounts of fracking-associated wastewater by injecting the wastewater into underground storage wells. According to the Center for Biological Diversity, at least 30 of California's offshore wastewater injection wells are located within miles of a fault line.

"Everything that we know about fracking chemicals, and increasing oil spill risk, and the increase earthquake risk — fracking makes people sick and it pollutes our oceans," Sakashita said. "It's an untenable position for the federal government to be taking."

The studies were initially sparked by a lawsuit brought against the federal government by environmental groups including the Center for Biological Diversity and the Environmental Defense Center. According to the lawsuit, the Department of the Interior had been approving offshore fracking operations without considering their impact on the environment — Sakashita said that they even found instances of a fracking permit that was approved the same day it was applied for. In some cases, because the operations were taking place in federal waters and required federal permits, local California governments didn't know that fracking was taking place just miles off of their coastlines.

In February, the Department of the Interior settled with environmental groups, agreeing to freeze fracking operations in federal waters along the Pacific coast until an environmental assessment could be completed.

In studying the options for fracking off the coast of California, the assessment looked at four options: approving permits on a case-by-case basis, approving permits but only if they did not frack at a shallow level, approving fracking but prohibiting wastewater discharge, and prohibiting fracking altogether.

In the end, the report found that the environmental impacts associated with continuing to permit fracking on a case-by-case basis would be negligible, and any potential impacts to the air or water would likely be localized and short-lived.

“The biggest concern is what we don’t know,” Maggie Hall, a staff attorney for the Environmental Defense Center, told ThinkProgress. “This is the first time these agencies have ever studied the impacts of offshore drilling in California, and our reading of the impact assessment is that it is really cursory, and sort of glosses over some issues.”

The report assumed that a maximum of five new fracking wells would be permitted each year. But the Center for Biological Diversity’s Sakashita argues that this is vastly underestimating the amount of interest in offshore fracking, and therefore understating the potential environmental impact of offshore fracking.

“One of the primary rationales [for finding a minimum environmental impact] is that it is used infrequently, but as we’ve seen with the fracking boom across the U.S., fracking is on the rise,” she said.

Indeed, fracking has seen a stunning rise in the United States over the past decade. In 2000, fracking made up just over two percent of U.S. oil production -- today, it makes up more than half. And while most fracking operations take place on land, a handful do take place in the ocean -- in 2014, fracking was taking place offshore in both California and the Gulf of Mexico.

Though the Obama administration has long looked at natural gas as an important bridge fuel, meant to ease the transition from dirtier fossil fuels like coal to renewables like wind and solar, it seems increasingly unlikely that natural gas can offer the climate benefits that its proponents tout.

Researchers have found that methane leaks associated with fracking production basically nullify its climate benefits, and could actually make climate change worse, as methane more effective at trapping heat, in the short term, than carbon dioxide.

“Fracking is going the opposite direction of solving our climate crisis,” Sakashita said, adding that the Center for Biological Diversity may consider taking legal action to try and stop offshore fracking in California. “Fracking is a really dirty and dangerous practice that has no place in our ocean.”