

Federal offshore fracking plan threatens California coast: Guest commentary

By Kristen Monsell
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Should toxic fracking chemicals be dumped into the wildlife-rich waters off the California coast? Most Californians would say no — and state law rightly forbids the discharge of waste from offshore oil drilling near our shores.

Yet the Obama administration is preparing to give oil companies a green light to pollute our ocean with these dangerous substances.

Offshore fracking is currently on hold in federal waters off California. This much-needed moratorium came after the U.S. Department of the Interior agreed under legal pressure from my organization to finally follow the law and analyze the risks of this toxic technique.

That was a huge victory for California. Federal officials weren't even tracking



Environmentalists protest at Cal State Long Beach as state regulators held a public forum in the school's auditorium on fracking in this Januray 2014 file photo. (Photo by Stephen Carr / Daily Breeze)

offshore fracking, let alone assessing the threats of this practice, which blasts fluid mixed with industrial chemicals beneath the ocean floor to fracture rocks and release oil and gas.

But just weeks after agreeing to take the legally required “hard look” at fracking’s environmental dangers, the government pushed out a cursory analysis that proposes to let the oil industry resume fracking in federal waters near Santa Barbara, Ventura and Long Beach.

This federal plan, which could be finalized within weeks, even proposes to let oil companies go back to dumping fracking chemicals mixed with oil wastewater into our oceans.

That's a huge problem. Before the offshore fracking moratorium, oil companies had federal permission to dispose more than 9 billion gallons of waste fluid a year into the Santa Barbara Channel.

California law forbids discharging fracking fluid and other drilling waste in state waters for good reason. Even the federal government's own analysis frankly admits that insufficient information about the toxicity of fracking chemicals and their effects on ocean ecosystems have been singled out as "critical data gaps."

In fact, several chemicals commonly used in fracking in our state are among the world's most toxic substances to marine animals, according to the California Council on Science and Technology.

These hazardous substances simply don't belong in our coastal waters, which provide crucial habitat for otters, whales and other wildlife — as well as surfers, swimmers, fishermen and other communities in our state.

But we won't even know what fracking chemicals are being dumped into the waters where we swim, surf or fish. Interior's draft proposal allows oil companies to frack without publicly disclosing the substances they're using.

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Interior's plan also seeks to cut out our Coastal Commission, which is supposed to have a say in federal activities like offshore fracking that affect our coastal zone. In state waters, oil companies are required to get a coastal development permit from the commission to use this inherently dangerous technique.

Last year, an aging pipeline carrying crude extracted from oil platforms in the Santa Barbara Channel ruptured, spewing out oil that killed hundreds of marine animals. The spill offered a horrific reminder what oil production can do to our coast.

The federal fracking plan increases the risk of another catastrophic spill by allowing companies to use this dangerously high-pressure technique virtually at will in aging offshore wells.

But Californians can push back against this dangerous plan. We can tell Interior Secretary Sally Jewell that fracking doesn't belong in our ocean.

If regulators do their jobs and truly analyze the dangers, they'll have to leave the moratorium in place. The risks of offshore fracking to California's wildlife and coastal communities are simply too great