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Feds to California: Open up lands to oil, gas drilling

BY **BRYNDON MADISON** POSTED 12.13.2019

The Trump administration is to opening up 1.2 million acres for oil and gas drilling across California from the Central Valley to the coast, targeting eight counties — Fresno, Kern, Kings, Madera, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Tulare, and Ventura.

The plan follows an earlier move by the federal Bureau of Land Management to issue leases for oil and gas drilling on roughly 800,000 acres in 11 counties, which could lead to the “development of up to 37 new oil and gas wells during the next 20 years,” according to the BLM. The counties affected are Alameda, Contra Costa, Fresno, Merced, Monterey, San Benito, San Joaquin, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, and Stanislaus.

BLM Spokeswoman Serena Baker said 37 new wells over 20 years is “not a very large number” when compared to the 1,800 active wells she says are already in the BLM’s Central Coast region — only 110 of which are on federal mineral estates.

“Less than 10 percent of California’s oil is produced on federal leases,” Baker said.

The BLM’s plan displays “a desire to circumvent the will of Californians,” said Democratic state Sen. Hannah-Beth Jackson, who represents Santa Barbara and Ventura counties. She described the federal plan as “reckless” and “outrageous.”

“I think this is the last thing we should be doing right now,” Jackson said, adding that “we don’t need to be drilling for more fossil fuels.”

The BLM has not sold oil and gas leases in California since 2013 because of lawsuits brought against the agency by the Center for Biological Diversity, and the Central Coast region in particular has seen “no new developments in the past 20 years,” said Ms. Baker.

A judge’s 2013 ruling sided with the Center, finding that the Bureau broke the law by issuing leases without adequately analyzing the environmental impacts of hydraulic fracturing, or “fracking,” the high-pressure injection of chemical fluids into underground fissures in order to extract oil and gas.

The latest BLM proposal is accused of doing the same thing.

The Center for Biological Diversity is suing the BLM over the 800,000-acre plan for failing to comply with California environmental protection laws, according to Clare Lakewood, the senior attorney with the Climate Law Institute for the Center of Biological Diversity.

The Center also plans to sue over the 1.2 million-acre, Lakewood said.

The BLM’s 1.2 million-acre proposal was first introduced in 2014, during the Obama administration. But, according to the BLM’s official Record of Decision, in 2017 a “U.S. district court order and settlement agreement ... required the BLM to analyze the effects of hydraulic fracturing in a supplemental (environmental impact analysis)”.

The final analysis was released Thursday and “concluded that changes to the land-use planning decisions presented in the 2014 (Resource Management Plan) are not necessary.”

When asked for comment, California Attorney General Xavier Becerra’s office provided, via email, quotes from a comment letter that was issued on the BLM’s proposal in June, before the Bureau decided to go through with it.

Becerra’s office said it was concerned with the plan’s failure to “take a ‘hard look’ at many of the significant impacts associated with hydraulic fracturing,” which is a practice new leases allow. The letter also contended that the federal plan “fails to consider reasonable alternatives... that could limit or mitigate the adverse impacts of hydraulic fracturing on the environment and nearby communities,” and said the Trump administration “failed to provide the public with a meaningful opportunity to participate in and comment on [the proposal’s] preparation.”

Baker also said that “the Federal Leasing Act of 1920 requires the BLM to provide land available for lease when there is an expression of interest.”

The sale of leases in the BLM’s Central Coast region is currently held up in court, but when asked if any bids have been made to lease the land that the BLM intends to open, Ms. Baker responded “there are no expressions of interest.”

In regards to the area that the Bureau wants to lease she added, “this is not new land” and “the acreage that is available for oil and gas development has been available for decades.”

Nevertheless, this push to begin opening up California to more fossil fuel production has raised the alarm for some lawmakers.

Congressman Jimmy Panetta (D-Carmel), introduced a bill last week responding directly to the BLM proposal. His bill would force the BLM to conduct more environmental studies and publish a “supplemental environmental impact statement assessing the impacts of oil and gas drilling on the Central Coast.”

That statement would cover an exhaustive list of environmental factors including pollution, greenhouse gas emissions, and impacts on endangered species as well as on underserved communities.

State Assemblymember Al Muratsuchi (D-Rolling Hills Estates) authored AB 342 that was signed by Gov. Newsom on Oct. 12. It prohibits the leasing of state lands for construction of infrastructure that would support oil and gas production on lands that “are currently or were at one time federally protected.”

According to the Assembly analysis, the law will “prevent any oil produced on federal land from leaving the production site.” While this does not “cut off every possible avenue to increase oil and gas production” it does serve to “provide significant roadblocks, which may deter potential lease holders.”

“The challenge with that bill,” says Lakewood, is that it is “limited to protected public lands” but does not cover all public lands. This means that it only really prevents the construction of infrastructure in places like national parks and monuments.

Jackson, who has authored a similar law affecting offshore drilling, supports AB 342. She said it “bans the state from supporting drilling on federal lands” by serving “to deter companies from drilling in federal land” and effectively “make transport prohibitively expensive.”