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Central Coast may be opened to new oil and gas extraction

Santa Cruz County appears unlikely to be affected by Trump administration proposal

SANTA CRUZ — More than 725,000 acres of Central Coast land could be opened up for oil and gas extraction under a new plan led by the Trump administration.

But due to local regulations — and economic realities — Santa Cruz County land appears unlikely to be affected even if the plan is approved.

The Bureau of Land Management released a proposal Thursday that could clear the way for new development of oil and gas extraction along California's Central Coast, following guidelines put into place by the Trump administration that take a more aggressive stance to resource extraction than the previous administration in the name of pursuing energy independence.

Santa Cruz, Monterey and Santa Clara are among the 11 California counties included in the plan, prompting an outpouring of criticism from Central Coast lawmakers.

Assemblyman Robert Rivas, D-Hollister, called on Gov. Newsom to resist the “dangerous” proposal at a press conference Monday and urged the state attorney general to file a lawsuit if it moves forward.

State Sen. Bill Monning, D-Carmel Valley, said he was “deeply disappointed” by the plan.

“In California, we are moving to zero emissions and this decision represents a step backwards in protecting the health of our communities from the consequences of climate change,” Monning said in a statement.

U.S Rep. Jimmy Panetta, D-Carmel Valley, encouraged residents to involve themselves in the process.

“Our community is concerned about expanded oil and gas exploitation on the Central Coast,” Panetta said in a statement Friday. “It is critical that we share our opinion of the proposal directly with this Administration.”

The federal proposal may be a moot point in Santa Cruz County due to an effective ban on all oil and gas exploration passed in 2014, according to Santa Cruz County spokesman Jason Hoppin.

“During the debate about fracking, the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors had the foresight to ban facilities supporting oil and gas exploration in unincorporated parts of the county — period,” Hoppin said. “We don’t expect to have to revisit that issue.”

Even without the local ban in place, Santa Cruz County’s most significant piece of federally managed land, the 5,800-acre Cotoni-Coast Dairies National Monument, would not be opened up to oil and gas exploitation. The land’s mineral rights are retained by the nonprofit Trust for Public Lands.

It was also not clear to what extent the plan could lead to increased drilling on the rest of the Central Coast.

The Bureau of Land Management projects that no more than 37 new wells are likely to be drilled along the Central Coast in the next 20 years under the proposal. And almost all new oil wells on the Central Coast have been drilled on or adjacent to existing extraction sites in the past two decades, according to Serena Baker, a spokeswoman for the Bureau of Land Management’s Central Coast Field Office.

However, Clare Lakewood, a senior attorney at the nonprofit Center for Biological Diversity, said she is highly skeptical of the bureau’s projections.

“That’s just not a realistic proposition,” Lakewood said. “The reality is that if you are opening all of these lands to drilling there is a risk that there will be exploration and drilling in any of those areas.”

The release of the proposal Thursday triggers a 30-day public protest period, although protests are limited to those who have already been involved in the process. Gov. Gavin Newsom has a 60-day window to review the plan for regulatory concerns on behalf of the state.