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Trump administration moves to open Central Coast lands for oil and gas, fracking

The Trump administration has released plans to expand oil and gas areas, including use of the controversial method of fracking, for public lands on the Central Coast.

Yet environmentalists and some area representatives oppose the plans, saying that it threatens local environments and reverses precedence on fracking policies.

"Trump's new plan aims to stab oil derricks and fracking rigs into some of California's most beautiful landscapes," said Clare Lakewood, a senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity, in a prepared statement. "From Monterey to the Bay Area, the president wants to let oil companies drill and spill their way across our beloved public lands and wildlife habitat."

Last month, the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) proposed opening up over 1 million acres of public land in the Central Valley and southern Central Coast to oil and gas production. On Thursday, the BLM published its proposed rules and environmental analysis that would impact over 725,000 acres largely concentrated in Fresno, Monterey and San Benito counties.

The changes follow a 2017 Executive Order signed by President Donald Trump promoting energy independence and economic growth.

"In keeping with the Administration's goal of strengthening America's energy independence, the BLM supports an all-of-the-above energy plan that includes oil and gas, coal, strategic minerals, and renewable sources such as wind, geothermal, and solar – all of which can be developed on public lands," the proposed changes outline. "America's free markets will help determine if energy development on public lands is feasible."

The total region spans 11 counties from Contra Costa to Monterey. Many of these areas have existing bans on fracking, too.

Federal officials have touted the plan's ability to provide economic opportunities for local communities while promoting environmentally responsible development of oil and gas on public lands, including fracking.

BLM estimated up to 37 new oil and gas wells would be drilled in the next 20 years, according to Serena Baker, a spokeswoman for the agency. Most of these outlined areas would be in or near existing oil fields, largely concentrated near Coalinga in western Fresno County, she said.

A press release boasted the industry supports approximately 3,000 jobs and \$623 million in tax revenue in Fresno, Monterey and San Benito counties.

This also follows a court order that stopped leasing public lands for oil and gas production without sufficient analysis. In 2013, a federal judge ruled BLM violated the law when issuing oil leases in Monterey and Fresno counties without considering the impacts of hydraulic fracturing, or fracking.

Fracking – using pressurized liquids to blast rocks in order to obtain natural gas, petroleum and brine – is a controversial method of extraction that opponents say leads to environmental harm including contaminated water and earthquakes.

Monterey County, according to a [2018 superior court decision](#), has not used fracking in over a decade.

Several counties that would be affected by the new proposal have already passed measures or ordinances banning the use of fracking.

Most oil and gas production in Monterey County is concentrated around San Ardo and Lynch Canyon, south of King City.

In 2016, Monterey County residents passed Measure Z that banned fracking and halting expansion of oil wells, though the latter part of the legislation was struck down in court last year.

The county is currently part of an appeal to uphold the fracking ban.

But because the county has limited jurisdiction on federal lands, the BLM proposed rule on fracking would likely stand in spite of Measure Z, according to Charles McKee, Monterey County counsel.

"The current administration doesn't seem to be reaching out, at least on this issue, to look at state and local regulations," he said. "I think it's important the local people should have a say on how local lands, whether federal or state, are used in their community."

Next week, as requested by Supervisor Luis Alejo, the board of supervisors plans to vote on sending a letter to federal and state leaders opposing the BLM proposals.

At a press conference in Salinas Monday morning, Assemblyman Robert Rivas also urged residents to oppose the federal proposal, calling the BLM move a "distraction" from issues of housing, homelessness and farm labor impacting the area.

He planned to send letters in opposition both to Gov. Gavin Newsom, who has 60 days to review the federal proposal for consistencies with state and local policies, and state Attorney General Xavier Becerra.

"It's inconsistent with this region and our vision moving forward," Rivas said. "This proposal really isn't consistent with meeting climate goals in our state."

Still, the Western States Petroleum Association, which represents oil companies in the region, applauded the decision.

"We're pleased that after five years, the process worked and the federal government has reaffirmed that hydraulic fracturing is a safe method of production in California," said Kara Greene, media relations manager for the association, in a statement.

"We look forward to being part of the discussions to ensure we continue to safely produce reliable energy to California consumers while meeting the policy needs of the state."

California has led efforts opposing many of the Trump administration's policies, including several lawsuits by the state attorney general. Recent state legislation signed last year aims to obtain 100% renewable energy for electricity by 2045.

In a tweet, Becerra signaled opposition to the May proposal impacting the Central Coast.

"This is 2019, not 1920," he wrote. "We don't need to jeopardize our health or environment to develop the energy sources we need."

There is a 30-day protest period for those who had previously participated in the planning process or those that may be adversely affected by the plan.