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Trump administration moves forward with final rule to allow new California drilling

The Trump administration moved forward Thursday with its plan to open up hundreds of thousands of acres on California's Central Coast to oil and gas drilling.

The effort comes despite opposition from Democratic officials in the Golden State, who have starkly criticized the plan.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) issued its final proposal as part of the administration's "energy independence" push on Thursday.

It would open up 725,500 acres of land across 11 counties in California to oil and gas lease sales. The counties affected include Monterey, Fresno and Santa Cruz.

The BLM hailed the proposal as a move that would strengthen U.S. energy independence.

"Sustainable development of oil and gas resources is a key component of the BLM's multiple use and sustained yield mission," BLM's Proposed Resource Management Plan Amendment and Final Environmental Impact Statement reads.

"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 report states.

The plan estimates that up to 32 new oil and gas development wells could be built on the federal lands during the plan's lifetime.

The Trump administration's drilling plans run directly counter to California's clean energy push, and the state's Attorney General Xavier Becerra (D) criticized it for having an emphasis on fossil fuel use.

"In California, we're already well on our way to energy independence and we're doing it in the smart way. This is 2019, not 1920. We don't need to jeopardize our health or our environment to develop the energy sources we need," he said in a statement.

California in September committed to transitioning its electric grid to 100 percent renewable energy use by 2045. Becerra outlined the health risks associated with fracking in a 2018 lawsuit he filed against the Trump administration for its Fracking Rule, implemented on Native American tribal lands.

Thursday's final plan replaces a 2017 drilling proposal drafted largely under the Obama administration. The updated Trump administration plan raises the area available for drilling by nearly 327,000 acres.

The administration's preferred plan, outlined in the final proposal, "applies the least restrictions necessary to develop Federal minerals within existing oil and gas fields where the vast majority of oil and gas production is projected to occur," the plan reads.

The administration has been moving to open up more areas in California to drilling and fracking.

In April, the BLM issued a proposal to reopen 400,000 acres of BLM-administered public land and 1.2 million acres of federal mineral estate, the subsurface acreage managed by BLM, to fracking in California counties including San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara and Ventura. The finalized plan is anticipated in the fall.

It has insisted that the drilling will take place without harming other uses of land in California.

"The BLM strives to be a good neighbor in the communities we serve, where we provide opportunities for economic growth with space for traditional uses such as ranching, mining, logging, and energy development as well as hunting and fishing," Serena Baker, BLM Central California District spokeswoman, told The Hill.

“This effort supports the Administration’s goals of promoting environmentally responsible development of oil and gas on public lands, creating jobs and providing economic opportunities for local communities. We believe that America’s free markets will help determine if energy development on public lands is feasible,” she said.

Around 10 percent of oil produced in California comes from BLM-managed land, according to Baker. About 5 percent of leases on all federal land use hydraulic fracturing, she said.

If either of the two plans go forward, it would end a five-year moratorium on oil and gas leasing of federal land and mineral estate in California. The ban has been in effect since a judge ruled in 2013 that BLM failed to consider the environmental risks of fracking when it issued oil leases in Monterey and Fresno counties.

The public will have 30 days to file a protest to the finalized BLM plan. California’s Governor Gavin Newsom (D) also has a 60-day window to review the plan for any inconsistencies with state and local plans and policies and provide recommendations.

The Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental group that has sued the federal government over its fracking plans, said that together, both BLM drilling proposals would target more than 1.7 million acres of land across 19 California counties.

“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 for the group. “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.”