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New oil drilling in the Bay Area? Trump administration opens possibility

The Trump administration brought its pro-drilling agenda to Northern California on Thursday, disclosing a plan to make more land available for oil and gas development, including parts of the Santa Cruz Mountains and East Bay hills.

Documents released by the U.S. Bureau of Land Management show the agency is looking to nearly double the amount of federal property and mineral deposits in its Central Coast region that can be leased by fossil fuel companies compared to what was proposed by the previous administration.

Roughly 725,000 acres across 11 counties will be opened up for new leasing, according to the bureau's preferred plan, including areas in or around Mount Diablo State Park near Walnut Creek and Butano State Park near Pescadero.

Industry experts say such spots, far beyond the major oil and gas fields in San Benito, Monterey and Fresno counties, are unlikely to attract interest from oil companies because of public outcry or engineering logistics — or because they don't find petroleum. But environmentalists aren't so sure.

“Many of these areas have drilling and active gas wells (nearby), so yes, there's a real risk that these places will be developed,” said Clare Lakewood, a senior attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity.

The federal government's new plan comes as part of an environmental report addressing a court ruling five years ago that essentially halted new drilling leases in California until the impacts of fracking were fully evaluated.

The Center for Biological Diversity and the Sierra Club had brought suit against the Bureau of Land management in 2013, alleging the agency had not sufficiently analyzed fracking's toll.

Fracking is a method of extracting oil in rock with high-pressure water and chemicals. The practice has become an increasingly popular way to get at previously inaccessible mineral deposits, but it can tear up the landscape, pollute groundwater and trigger earthquakes.

While environmental groups say fracking's impacts have become increasingly evident since the lawsuit, the Bureau of Land Management report outlines ways in which it says the technology can be safely deployed.

The fossil fuel industry praised the agency Thursday for moving forward with a plan that embraces fracking and advances the extraction of oil and gas.

“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, spokeswoman for the trade group Western States Petroleum Association.

The Bureau of Land Management’s new report comes in contrast to the agency’s initial environmental report, prepared under President Barack Obama and released in early 2017. That document proposed leasing about 400,000 acres in the Central Coast region for oil and gas development.

“For the BLM, the oil and gas program needs to align with new secretarial orders,” said agency spokeswoman Serena Baker, referring to the Trump administration’s aggressive push to expand energy production.

In the bureau’s Central Coast region, drilling operations are currently limited to Fresno, Monterey, San Benito, Alameda, Contra Costa and Santa Clara counties.

Industry experts say that while leases may be offered in additional parts of the region, which include the counties of Merced, San Joaquin, San Mateo, Santa Cruz and Stanislaus, it’s not likely.

“Drilling for oil is so expensive in California, it’s hard for me to believe that anyone is doing it,” said Amy Myers Jaffe, formerly with the UC Davis Institute of Transportation Studies and now a senior fellow at the nonprofit Council on Foreign Relations in New York. “There’s only going to be new drilling if there’s someone who has property nearby and they want to extend what they’re doing on the federal pocket next door.”

The Bureau of Land Management estimates that 37 new oil and gas wells will be drilled as a result of the new plan, a small fraction of the few thousand existing wells in the region.

Most of California’s oil operations are on state and private property, with California regulators dictating if and where new drilling proceeds. Like the Trump administration, officials in Sacramento have been supportive of fossil fuel extraction.

Environmental groups have pressed the state to limit or halt new drilling, citing not only the local problems but the contribution of fossil fuels to global warming.

“There are hundreds of organizations that have been coming together for years” to pressure California officials, said Monica Embrey, a spokeswoman for the Sierra Club. She’s hoping the Newsom administration will finally act.

The Bureau of Land Management’s new report is scheduled to be published Friday in the Federal Register, at which time a 30-day public comment period begins. The governor has 60 days to weigh in. After input is gathered, the agency will review any concerns and decide how to move forward.

Last month, the bureau released a similar document for Southern and Central California, clearing the way for new oil and gas development on more than 1 million acres of federal land and mineral deposits.