

CLIMATE CHANGE

California Just Can't Quit Fracking

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California is often hailed as a leader of U.S. climate action due to its fuel efficiency standards, renewable energy goals, and other environmental regulations. It's even made big, splashy announcements like ending new gas-powered car sales by 2035.

But it also has a bad habit of continuing to expand fossil fuel extraction. On Tuesday, data from the California Energy Management Division shows that the state approved 11 new fracking permits. The permits will allow the firm that applied for them to frack the wells a combined 59 times.

If this seems hypocritical, it is, but it's also not surprising. California Gov. Gavin Newsom has repeatedly said he supports the managed decline of fossil fuel production in the state, yet under his leadership, the state has approved more than 8,000 new oil and gas permits.

"California can never be a climate leader as long as Newsom continues to promote more fracking and drilling," Kassie Siegel, director of the Climate

Law Institute at the Center for Biological Diversity, said. “Climate leaders don’t frack, climate leaders don’t drill.”

California has made noises that sound like it plans to stop extraction. Last year, Newsom said he supported phasing out fracking by 2024, and in November 2019, he even placed a moratorium on issuing fracking permits. But since lifting that policy last April, the state has given out 94 more of them.

The majority of those new permits, including the 11 granted this week, have gone to Aera Energy, a joint venture between the energy giants Shell Oil and ExxonMobil. That’s a particularly bad look for Newsom, because Newsom’s close friend Jason Kinney—with whom he was recently photographed breaking quarantine at the fancy Napa Valley restaurant the French Laundry—is a lobbyist for Aera.

“It’s a scandal,” said Siegal.

The state has a long history of being built on oil and gas. Wells dot the landscape across the Central Valley, and are even hidden in plain sight in urban areas like Los Angeles. That’s led to adverse health impacts, to say nothing of the numerous refineries in the state (including one that spilled oil into San Francisco Bay just this week). But the new leases are the antithesis to where the state says it’s going as a climate leader.

Siegal believes that California’s fracking expansion isn’t just wrong, but also illegal. That’s why the Center for Biological Diversity will soon file a legal case against the Newsom administration for “blatant violation” of the California involved Environmental Quality Act. Under the legislation, the administration is meant to hold a public review process and conduct an environmental review of every permit application they receive. But Siegal says they’ve “ignored” that responsibility.

If California truly wants to be seen as a hallmark of progressive climate policy, Siegal said it should stop approving all new fracking permits immediately.

“The number one thing that has to be a part of any successful climate policy is limiting the amount of fossil fuels that come out of the ground. You cannot succeed if you don’t do that,” she said.