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## Environmentalists Rip California Over New Fracking Permits

February 24, 2021 MARIA DINZEO

*Two years ago, California promised extensive reviews for future fracking permits. Environmentalists say thousands have been issued without so much as a look.*

OAKLAND, Calif. (CN) – Governor Gavin Newsom imposed tighter constraints on the oil and gas industry two years ago, proclaiming that California would [suspend](#) all new fracking permits and require applications for oil and gas extraction to be reviewed by independent experts.

But in a [lawsuit](#) filed Wednesday, the Center for Biological Diversity says the state's top oil and gas regulator continues to approve thousands of oil and gas drilling permits without any environmental review.

Fracking is a method of oil extraction that involves injecting water, chemicals or sand into the ground to create pressure high enough to force oil to the surface. While the practice has opened up several previously unattainable reservoirs of natural gas and other fossil fuels in California and around the nation, environmentalists warn the practice contaminates well water, harms wildlife, and causes higher rates of asthma and cancer.

All fracking operations require approval from California Geologic Energy Management Division, or CalGEM. According to the Center for Biological Diversity, the agency routinely shirks its obligation to review each project's affect on the environment before issuing permits.

"Instead, CalGEM repeatedly and consistently issues permits and approvals for oil and gas drilling, well stimulation, and injection projects without properly disclosing, analyzing, or mitigating the significant environmental impacts of these projects," the center says, noting that last year alone, CalGEM approved nearly 2,000 permits for new oil and gas wells. It also issued 213 permits for fracking in 2019, and 83 in 2020.

The regulator also sidestepped the California Environmental Quality Act's public notice, hearing and commenting requirements, the center says, and does not make Notice of Intent to Drill applications available on its website.

In November 2020, a California Department of Finance [audit](#) found CalGEM issued hundreds of improper permits for new wells in 2019, and had approved projects using temporary placeholders or “dummy” numbers with no documentation that an environmental review had ever taken place.

“State laws are designed to protect communities and minimize pollution,” attorney Deborah Sivas, director of the [Environmental Law Clinic](#) at Stanford Law School, said in a statement. “The state can’t continue to pretend these fundamental protections don’t apply to one of the most polluting and dangerous industries on the planet.”

The center condemned Newsom for allowing the oil and gas regulator to continue issuing permits without a review while touting a progressive climate policy. It is seeking an injunction to stop CalGEM from continuing the practice.

“The governor is openly flouting the law by rubberstamping new oil permits, and we believe the courts will make him stop,” center attorney Hollin Kretzmann said in a statement.

In a phone interview, Kretzmann said oil companies are circumventing state laws like CEQA that require them to inform communities about the affect their projects could have on public health and the environment.

“The way it’s supposed to work is when an agency approves a project, they are supposed to do a comprehensive study to disclose all of the dangers and mitigate them to the extent possible and with these drilling permits they just skip all of that,” Kretzmann said. “It allows them to evade public scrutiny and allows oil companies to get a rubberstamp permit without anyone finding out. That’s what the laws are in place for — so communities can be heard and experts can weigh in.”

Meanwhile, two Democratic lawmakers have [introduced a bill](#) that would halt the issuance of new fracking permits beginning Jan. 1, 2022, and ban all fracking in the state by Jan. 1, 2027.

Kretzmann called the proposed fracking ban a step in the right direction, but said he’s disappointed Newsom has left it up to the Legislature.

“That’s been a running theme with Governor Newsom — that his rhetoric on climate change and the environment does not match with his actions,” he said. “Hopefully those legislators will come up with a strong fracking ban, but in the meantime, the oil and gas problem in California is much larger. Permits that don’t involve fracking are still a risk to front line communities.”

The Department of Conservation — which oversees CalGEM — said Newsom did not freeze new fracking permits, but [issued a moratorium](#) halting approvals of new oil extraction wells while regulators consult with experts to examine oil leaks in Kern County to determine whether such extractions can be done safely. Pending applications will be reviewed independently in response to the Department of Finance's audit.

It also said CalGEM is [crafting](#) new rules to protect the environment and public health.

“CalGEM follows all state laws and regulations in approving permits. This administration has strengthened oversight, imposed more rigorous standards for permit review and institutionalized independent scientific and technical review of its processes. California standards exceed those of any other state in the country,” spokesman Jacob Roper said in an email.

Newsom's office did not return a request for comment Wednesday.