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California sued over its oil and gas permitting practices

Mark Olalde

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The Center for Biological Diversity on Wednesday filed a lawsuit against California that challenges the state's approval of thousands of permits to drill for oil and gas. The environmental advocacy organization is asking the court to issue an injunction against the state to compel it to follow the California Environmental Quality Act in its permitting of oil and gas wells.

The group alleges that the California Geologic Energy Management Division, which is tasked with regulating the state's oil and gas industry, "has a consistent and ongoing pattern and practice of ignoring its legal obligation to conduct environmental review before issuing oil and gas permits throughout the state." The group argued in its complaint that CalGEM issues drilling approvals with no or incomplete environmental reviews and leans on inappropriate exemptions under the state's central environmental law.

"It is completely unacceptable for Gov. (Gavin) Newsom to continue to ignore our flagship environmental law that's meant to protect people from oil industry pollution," Hollin Kretzmann, an attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity's Climate Law Institute, said in a statement. "Newsom can't protect our health and climate while giving thousands of illegal permits each year to this dirty and dangerous industry."

The case was filed in the Alameda County Superior Court, far from the state's main oil-producing regions in the southern reaches of the Central Valley and around the Los Angeles Basin.

California, still a top-10 oil and gas producer, once was one of the largest petroleum-producing states in the country after a prospector struck oil in 1892 in Los Angeles. In the ensuing years, roughly 240,000 known oil and gas wells have been punched into the Golden State. Tens of thousands of these now sit idle or orphaned, raising concerns that they could be left to the state to clean up.

CalGEM — previously known as the Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources, or DOGGR — has for years been accused of favoring the industry over the environment and public health. Newsom also has come under fire as the state has continued to issue hydraulic fracturing permits to Aera Energy, a large oil company, that retained the lobbying firm where his friend Jason Kinney works.

“The state’s failure to conduct environmental review has been in reckless disregard of the health and safety impacts imposed on communities at the frontlines of gas and oil operations,” Gladys Limón, executive director of the California Environmental Justice Alliance, said in a statement. “Our government’s primary duty is to protect communities, which requires diligently identifying and preventing short- and long-term impacts to people’s health and life expectancy.”

This litigation is just one front on which the fight over the future of the Golden State's oil industry will play out this year.

Earlier in February, state Sen. Scott Wiener, D-San Francisco, and Sen. Monique Limon, D-Santa Barbara, introduced a bill to ban fracking and to call for a buffer zone between oil wells and sensitive areas such as neighborhoods. Wells leak gases that contribute to climate change and negatively impact public health, leading environmentalists and community groups to push for a stop to production in populous areas.