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## California environmentalists sue state over fossil fuel permits

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|02/24/2021 03:01 AM EST

Environmentalists sued the Newsom administration on Wednesday alleging California is illegally permitting fossil fuel wells, following through on threats to take legal action if the state didn't tighten the practice.

**Impact:** The complaint, [filed against the California Geologic Energy Management Division](#) in Alameda County Superior Court, is a major escalation by the Center for Biological Diversity, which has been criticizing Gov. Gavin Newsom for not taking more aggressive action to rein in oil and gas activity responsible for climate change. The governor is now fighting fossil fuel battles on multiple fronts: In addition to the wells lawsuit, he is feeling political heat on a [bill to ban fracking](#) and a [regulatory process to consider drilling buffer zones](#).

**Background:** Last spring, a state appeals court [rejected oil-rich Kern County's blanket blessing of 67,000-plus wells](#) over the next 25 years, finding that the county didn't fully consider the effects of fossil fuel activity. The court set aside the underlying county-issued ordinance and environmental review, which environmentalists highlighted when claiming that CalGEM permit approvals after the decision [relied on those disallowed documents](#).

Then in September, the Center for Biological Diversity sent a letter to the agency [notifying it of the group's intent to sue](#), adding that Newsom's [climate rhetoric](#) hasn't squared with CalGEM's [continued approvals of oil and gas operations](#). Two months later, the group [sent a final warning letter](#).

**Details:** In the Wednesday complaint, the Center for Biological Diversity outlined several ways in which CalGEM is allegedly shirking its responsibilities, which in 2019 were [updated to focus more on environmental and public health protection](#) rather than the explicit promotion of fossil fuel extraction.

Environmentalists cite a November audit by Newsom's Department of Finance, which discovered that CalGEM [used placeholder information to approve over 200 well permits](#) during a seven-month period in 2019. They also criticize project approvals issued without any publicly available California Environmental Quality Act review documentation since CalGEM's [weekly permit summaries](#) have to be [manually requested](#) and are often the only way to find out what broad action it has taken.

"The oil and gas projects authorized by CalGEM endanger the health and safety millions of Californians. The cumulative impact of oil and gas activity in the state has a significant impact on California's air, water, climate, wildlife, and health," the complaint states. "The public has been denied the information, analysis, and mitigation measures that could reduce the harms from oil and gas. The public has also been deprived of opportunities to comment on these dangerous projects because of the lack of notice, a commenting period, and hearings on these projects."

**CalGEM's position:** The California Natural Resources Agency said in a November statement after the Center for Biological Diversity's final warning letter that CalGEM "is required to follow all state laws and regulations in approving permits. While CalGEM's role is to implement current law, the Newsom Administration has strengthened oversight and bolstered regulatory staff, [placed a moratorium on a practice](#) that may be leading to oil leaks, and institutionalized independent scientific and technical review of its processes from Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory."

**What's next:** The Center for Biological Diversity is asking for the court to declare the agency's current practices unlawful. The group also wants a permanent injunction forcing CalGEM to suspend several practices unless the agency complies with CEQA.