

Plan to allow thousands of California oil wells faces vote

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LOS ANGELES (AP) — After a state appeals court blocked Kern County's effort to speed up new oil and gas drilling, officials overseeing the state's prime oil patch have revised an ordinance that could permit tens of thousands of new wells over the next 15 years.

The Kern County Board of Supervisors is poised to vote Monday on the plan that would streamline the permitting process by creating a blanket environmental impact report for drilling as many as 2,700 wells a year.

While the petroleum industry supports the changes, environmentalists and community groups have said the plan has barely changed and doesn't address violations of the California Environmental Quality Act.

The 5th District Court of Appeal in Fresno last year found the 2015 plan violated the law by not fully evaluating or disclosing environmental damage that would occur from drilling.

“They’re attempting this huge end-around of this fundamental environmental protection,” said attorney Hollin Kretzmann of the Center for Biological Diversity. “If you drill a well in Kern County, you’re going to get a rubber-stamp permit.”

Kern County, about 100 miles (161 kilometers) north of Los Angeles, is the state’s leading fossil fuel producer. About 1 in 7 workers in the county has a job tied to the industry.

The county hasn't been able to issue permits in a year and the industry is facing challenges from lawmakers as well as environmental groups for creating air and water pollution and for significant contributions to climate change.

Gov. Gavin Newsom ordered a ban on the sale of new gas-powered passenger cars and trucks by 2035. New legislation would ban all fracking by 2027, limiting a technique by energy companies to inject water, sand, gravel and chemicals in the ground at high pressure to extract hard-to-reach oil and gas.

The county planning department, which developed the ordinance with the help of the petroleum industry, defended the revised plan and said it would promote public health and safety.

The county says that under the revised plan, for example, barriers will be placed around oil drilling rigs to keep the noise down.

Planning Director Lorelei Oviatt refused to comment in advance of the hearing.

Kevin Slagle, vice president of the Western States Petroleum Association, said the group strongly supports the ordinance.

The controversy over the ordinance began when the county amended its zoning code in 2015 to allow it to approve new oil and gas extraction permits after a review that determined applications would meet the requirements of a blanket environmental impact report. Environmentalists argued that a one-size-fits-all approach didn't address different factors that vary by location such as habitat or proximity to neighborhoods.

The ordinance was designed to avoid costly, time-consuming environmental reviews of individual wells and was approved despite "significant, adverse environmental impacts," the appellate court said.

"The ordinance's basic purpose is the acceleration of oil and gas development and the economic benefits that might be achieved by that development," the ruling said. "Its basic purpose is not the protection of the environment."

Juan Flores of the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment said the county hasn't addressed the court's concerns. His organization will likely be returning to court if the board approves the latest iteration of the proposal, he said.

“The biggest issue for the community is that they're trying to excuse thousands upon thousands of wells with just one environmental impact report,” Flores said. “They shouldn't get a pass on putting the science behind their oil wells so they can prove there's no negative impact on the environment or human health.”