

As California Faces Climate Crisis, One County Approves Fast-track Permits for New Oil Wells

Kern County produces 80 percent of the state's oil and natural gas.

Joseph Guzman | March 12, 2021

Story at a glance

- The Kern County Board of Supervisors on Monday approved a revised ordinance in a unanimous vote that could result in the approval of more than 40,000 new oil and gas wells.
- The ordinance allows for a single environmental impact report to serve as an environmental review for up to 2,700 new oil and gas wells annually.
- Environmental and community groups on Wednesday filed a lawsuit against the county, calling it a “disaster for public health.”

As California faces severe drought, erosion and record wildfires worsened by climate change, one of the state's counties has opened up the door to fast-track permits for tens of thousands of new oil and gas wells over the next 15 years, according to The Associated Press.

The Kern County Board of Supervisors on Monday approved a revised ordinance in a unanimous vote that could result in the approval of more than 40,000 new oil and gas wells in the county that produces 80 percent of the state's oil and natural gas.

The ordinance allows for a single environmental impact report to serve as an environmental review for up to 2,700 new oil and gas wells annually.

The order was revised after a state appeals court last year ruled a 2015 ordinance with even broader restrictions violated the California Environmental Quality Act, by not fully evaluating and disclosing the environmental impact from drilling. That ordinance would have allowed for up to 72,000 wells by 2035.

Supporters of the measure said it would support quality jobs in the county, where 1 in 7 residents has a job tied to the fossil fuel industry, and would be more environmentally sound than importing oil to meet the state's energy needs.

“Why would we import more when we can produce it here safely and cleaner than anyone else in the world,” Board Supervisor Zack Scrivner said, according to AP.

Environmental and community groups on Wednesday filed a lawsuit against the county, calling it a “disaster for public health,” particularly for low-income communities of color.

“Kern County’s oil production is some of the dirtiest and most damaging in the world for people’s health and our climate,” said Hollin Kretzmann, an attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity’s Climate Law Institute.

“Adding tens of thousands of wells will trigger more frequent and severe droughts, heatwaves and wildfires and cause more illness and death,” Kretzmann added.

California as a whole has set ambitious goals to cut its greenhouse gas emissions. The state is aiming to reach economywide carbon neutrality by 2045, and Gov. Gavin Newsom (D) has ordered the ban of the sale of new gas-powered passenger cars and trucks by 2035.