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# California's fossil fuel expansion plan to test Newsom's clean energy record

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SACRAMENTO — Kern County officials approved a plan that could increase the number of oil wells in California by a staggering 40 percent or more over the next 15 years — a shift that is unfolding even as Gov. Gavin Newsom works to burnish his clean energy credentials.

Experts and insiders expect the Newsom administration will honor the local decision by signing off on many of the drilling applications, which could undermine the governor's climate-friendly image and damage his relationship with environmentalists.

Newsom is [under similar pressure to take a stronger stance](#) on proposals to ban fracking and impose drilling buffer zones. He called for a bill to prohibit the controversial extraction technique last fall when on stronger political footing, but in recent weeks he [dodged questions about](#) the measure — possibly to avoid alienating deep-pocketed fossil fuel interests during a recall drive.

"I think it would be political — I don't want to use the word 'suicide' — but it's extremely risky for him, especially now as the winds blowing against him are picking up. I don't think he will pick a big fight with oil right now," said Chandra Commuri, a public policy researcher at California State University, Bakersfield. "At the end of the day, he wants to remain governor; he has ambitions for higher office. I'm pretty sure he knows what's best for him in the long run."

The ordinance unanimously approved after over eight hours of public comment will allow more than 40,000 new oil and gas wells over the next 15 years, even though California aims to achieve economy-wide carbon neutrality by 2045. Statewide, there are 101,300 wells in use and not all of those are active, meaning the increase could be higher than 40 percent.

Newsom, whose office deferred comment to the California Geologic Energy Management Division, has taken a series of well-publicized stances on energy and environmental issues, especially as climate change-exacerbated wildfires have caused record-setting death and destruction in recent years. He made a bold announcement last fall to [stop the sale of new gasoline-fueled vehicles by 2035](#), along with a [land conservation plan](#) and other policies throughout the first two years of his term.

Yet the state has continued green-lighting permits, even during the pandemic — much to environmentalists' chagrin. Some of the approvals have gone to [Aera Energy, whose lobbyist dined with Newsom](#) during the now-infamous dinner party at the Napa Valley's French Laundry restaurant.

Environmentalists have pointed to those patterns as they argue that Newsom's rhetoric on clean energy hasn't matched his actions. [The Center for Biological Diversity sued CalGEM last month, alleging the illegal permitting of wells.](#) Drilling has disproportionately impacted communities of color, and environmental justice groups mobilized hundreds of residents to voice opposition to the new Kern County fossil fuel policies.

Juan Flores, a community organizer with the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, said the county's decision puts pressure on CalGEM to abide by its new public-focused mission and not sign off on any Kern-approved wells. The buck stops with Newsom, he argued, as the ultimate boss of the agency.

Climate issues may not be driving the campaign to recall Newsom, Flores said, but "a lot of his base, a lot of the people who voted for him, will be disenchanted and disenfranchised if he shows that he would rather sell out the dream that California can be an inclusive leader when it comes to environmental justice."

CalGEM said in a statement Monday that it "follows all state laws and regulations in approving permits," and that it will do the same with any applications from Kern County drillers.

"In addition, the Governor is committed to achieving our climate goals in ways that continue to grow our economy while preserving and creating high-quality jobs, including in counties like Kern that currently rely on resource-intensive industries for jobs and for the overall tax base," the agency wrote.

Fossil fuel drama confronted the governor two summers ago, when an inland oil spill [leaked nearly 32,000 barrels' worth of oil](#) near McKittrick. That news was followed by revelations that state officials [owned stock in companies they regulated](#) and that permit approvals [accelerated without Newsom's knowledge](#). Those developments [prompted the governor's office to craft reforms](#) renaming the agency and changing its mission to focus on protecting public health and environmental quality instead of promoting the extraction of fossil fuels.

The changes weren't well-received by the Central Valley, which has always sparred with the state on oil and gas. Early last year, Newsom officials traveled to Kern County to explain the agency's new mandate but were [roasted by county supervisors](#) who accused the governor of being "under pressure from environmental extremists." One supervisor went so far as to display photos of public hangings in Saudi Arabia and burning pipelines in South America to justify why California should rely on in-state oil.

Kern County was dealt a defeat soon after that uproarious meeting, however, when a state appeals court [rejected parts of its original plan](#) to approve new wells over the next 20 years. Rather than protest the ruling at the California Supreme Court, the county decided to revise its

environmental impact report. Its new, [1,842-page revised plan](#) includes mandatory setbacks, noise mitigation and other protective measures, but it still allows for up to 2,700 new wells per year, pending CalGEM approvals.

Environmentalists argue the true number of new wells could be far greater than county officials have publicly acknowledged. In a [letter to county supervisors](#), they write that the county's own documents show that the number of new wells that could come online in the next 15 years is 67,425, rather than the 40,445 well figure provided at a meeting last month.

Green groups argue that Kern County hasn't addressed the appeals court's concerns. The plan to expand fossil fuel activity, they say, will do long-lasting damage to the environment and public health, causing ecological disruptions, public health risks and planet-warming emissions.

Environmentalists also point to the influence of industry groups over the process, as the Western States Petroleum Association and the California Independent Petroleum Association helped draft the proposed changes. WSPA spent \$4.33 million on state lobbying last year, the most of any organization. The groups declined to comment ahead of Monday's vote.

Tensions spilled over last month when Lorelei Oviatt, director of the Kern County Planning and Natural Resources Department, lamented the dynamic between local and state officials as she defended the revised plan.

"Characterizations have been made that Kern County only cares to allow oil to be produced," she said during a meeting. "I think these 72 binders show, and our years of public hearings show and the extensive environmental protection that we've brought forward, that we are as interested as anyone in protecting the health and safety of our communities."

"We are not interested in allowing Sacramento to be the arbitrator of what is protection," Oviatt added.

Even those who support fossil fuel production, including Assemblymember Carlos Villapudua (D-Stockton), recognize Newsom's conundrum.

"The governor — God, I'd hate to be in his shoes — but that's what the head coach does; he's the one who has to answer and deal with everything that's being thrown at him," said Villapudua, who represents part of the oil-rich Central Valley. "Of course he's under a lot of pressure. At some point, he's going to have to decide what his decision is going to be."