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Kern County facing lawsuit over vote to allow new oil wells

By: Veronica Morley, 23ABC

BAKERSFIELD, Calif. (KERO) — Kern County is now facing legal action following a vote from the Board of Supervisors to allow thousands of new wells to be developed over the next 15 years.

A lawsuit filed this week hopes to reverse a decision made Monday that allows for nearly 40,000 new oil and gas wells to be developed in Kern County by 2036. Petitioners allege that the new wells will be a "disaster for public health...particularly low-income communities."

The lawsuit was filed by community and environmental groups, including the Committee for a Better Arvin, the Committee for a Better Shafter, the Comité Progreso de Lamont, Natural Resources Defense Council, Sierra Club, and Center for Biological Diversity.

In response to the new lawsuit, the county issued a statement saying:

We're confident in our work and our project, and beyond that, the County is not providing any further comment on this pending litigation.

The new ordinance was unanimously approved Monday by the Board of Supervisors.

During the special meeting, hundreds of Kern County residents voiced their concerns and their support for the new wells.

Those in support of the new ordinance highlight the millions of dollars in tax revenue that the new ordinance is expected to provide. The plan is to use a portion of those funds for public safety and education.

During the meeting Monday, Kern County Assessor Recorder Jon Lifquist said oil has been increasing in price over the last five years.

"When COVID hit, the demand for oil decreased dramatically and the price went down," said Lifquist.

He projects a 35% decrease in the county's oil industry this year, which is one reason he said it was vital for the county to pass the ordinance. He said the current decline in oil valuations is an indication of what further declines Kern might see in the future if it is unable to permit new oil wells.

Petitioners in the lawsuit argue that adding the news wells will trigger more droughts and heatwaves, as well as increase pollution fossil fuel emissions throughout Kern County.

Kern Citizen's for Energy, one of the most outspoken supporters of the new ordinance, said the lawsuit was "unfortunate".

According to the group, Kern's oil industry is responsible for 25,000 jobs and should continue to lead the way in oil and gas, just as we lead the way in wind and solar.