Scientists Urge Gov. Newsom to Stop Fossil Fuel Expansion, End Neighborhood Oil Drilling

June 12, 2023

Governor Gavin Newsom
1021 O Street, Suite 9000
Sacramento, CA 95814

Secretary Wade Crowfoot
California Natural Resources Agency
715 P Street, 20th Floor
Sacramento, CA 95814

cc: Gabe Tiffany, Interim State Oil and Gas Supervisor

Dear Governor Newsom and Secretary Crowfoot,

As California and U.S. scientists, we commend you on taking key steps toward protecting California’s frontline communities and our climate from fossil fuel pollution, including supporting legislation to establish a health and safety buffer zone between communities and oil and gas extraction and taking steps to end Big Oil’s price gouging of working families at the pump.

However, in this time of emergency, we are shocked at the sharp increase in oil and gas permitting by CalGEM, which has approved more than 1,000 permits this year for oil and gas operators to continue drilling. Even more shocking is the fact that almost two-thirds of those permits are for projects within the landmark 3,200-foot health and safety buffer you and your administration fought hard to pass last fall.

California cannot be a climate, health and environmental justice leader while giving permits to the oil industry to dig, burn, and dump toxic pollution in our communities, air, and water.

We implore you to take the science-and-justice-based actions needed now to phase out the fossil fuels driving the escalating climate, health, and justice crises in our state, and oversee an equitable, clean, renewable energy buildout that protects all Californians. Specifically, we urge you to:

(1) **Restart the health and safety rulemaking** to permanently establish a 3,200-foot health and safety protection zone that prohibits all oil and gas operations within a minimum 3,200 feet of homes, schools, hospitals, and other sensitive sites, as advised by CalGEM’s own public health experts.

(2) **Stop issuing permits for oil and gas extraction and fossil fuel infrastructure.** This action must include an immediate halt to permits for new oil and gas wells and reworks of existing wells, especially those within the 3,200-foot health and safety protection zone.
California’s oil industry has created an interlinked public health, environmental justice, and climate crisis in our state. Public health studies have established that living near oil and gas wells increases the risks of cancer, asthma and other respiratory diseases, preterm births, low birthweights, and other serious harms, threatening the health of the more than 7 million Californians who live within a mile of at least one oil or gas well.  

A long history of environmental racism has concentrated oil and gas wells and other fossil fuel infrastructure in communities of color, harming them first and worst and undermining the state’s environmental justice goals.

Ending new fossil fuel production and infrastructure is also necessary to limit global temperature rise to the Paris Agreement’s 1.5°C limit and prevent the most catastrophic climate harms, as established by the IPCC, United Nations, International Energy Agency, and extensive research. Yet California continues to approve permits for oil and gas drilling, extracting some of the world’s dirtiest, most climate-damaging oil.

California must also reject ineffective and dangerous false solutions like carbon capture and storage (CCS), hydrogen produced from fossil fuels, and carbon offsets that enable the fossil fuel industry to prolong its polluting operations.

We implore you to lead the necessary, rapid, just transition away from fossil fuels, beginning with an immediate end to neighborhood drilling and all new fossil fuel project approvals statewide, and oversee a rapid buildout of clean, renewable energy that truly protects people and the planet.

Sincerely,

Scientists joining this letter do so in their individual capacities and not on behalf of the institutions with which they are affiliated.

Original Signatories:

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References

1 See e.g., Shonkoff, Seth B.C. et al., Response to CalGEM Questions for the California Oil and Gas Public Health Rulemaking Scientific Advisory Panel (October 1, 2021), https://www.conservation.ca.gov/calgem/Documents/public-health/Public%20Health%20Panel%20Responses_FINAL%20ADA.pdf
4 State of California Department of Justice, Environmental Justice, https://oag.ca.gov/environment/justice (“Every Californian should have the opportunity to live in a community that is healthy and safe. This is especially true for low-income communities and communities of color, who suffer disproportionate exposure to pollution and the corresponding health impacts from that exposure.”)
5 IPCC, Synthesis Report of the IPCC Sixth Assessment Report (AR6), https://www.ipcc.ch/ar6-syr/ (“Projected CO₂ emissions from existing fossil fuel infrastructure without additional abatement would exceed the remaining carbon budget for 1.5°C (high confidence).”)
7 International Energy Agency, Pathway to critical and formidable goal of net-zero emissions by 2050 is narrow but brings huge benefits, according to IEA special report (May 2021), https://www.iea.org/news/pathway-to-critical-and-formidable-goal-of-net-zero-emissions-by-2050-is-narrow-but-brings-huge-benefits; Statement by Fatih Birol, the IEA’s executive director: “If governments are serious about the climate crisis, there can be no new investments in oil, gas and coal, from now – from this year,” https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2021/may/18/no-new-investment-in-fossil-fuels-demands-top-energy-economist
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https://pubs.rsc.org/en/content/articlelanding/2019/ee/c9ee02709b#!divAbstract; Badgley, Grayson et al., Systematic over-crediting in California’s forest carbon offsets, 28 Global Change Biology 1433 (2021),