# **Activists, Kern officials agree on need to address leaky oil wells**

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**Body**

Jun. 22—Local government should be doing more, environmental justice advocates said at this week's Board of Supervisors meeting, to help address leaky ***oil*** wells in Arvin, Lamont and Weedpatch.

Representatives of two activist groups called on county officials to work with state regulators, or at least write a letter emphasizing the urgency of the situation, to stop methane emissions at a series of wells found last month to have been leaking the gas for an unknown duration.

"We ask that ***Kern*** County work with CalGEM (the state Geologic Energy Management Division) to make sure that all the leaky wells are fixed in an efficient and quick manner to make sure that residents are safe," Sandra Plascencia, a policy advocate for Leadership Council for Justice and Accountability, said at Tuesday's board meeting.

Concerns were raised earlier this month after inspections by a state task force including CalGEM found 27 ***oil*** well sites in the Arvin-Lamont area were leaking methane. Such emissions can contaminate water supplies, present public health risks and, depending how well vented they are, potentially ignite.

The leaks were located within 1,000 to 3,200 feet of homes and schools, prompting worries the emissions may have contributed to health problems among some local residents.

"Residents have expressed deep concerns over the leaking or potentially leaking wells in their area," Plascencia said. "They share that their children often experience headaches and nosebleeds, which tend to be side effects of emissions from leaking wells."

Plascencia pointed to Fuller Acres, a community near Arvin and Lamont that lies not far from an ***oil*** refinery, a dairy farm and cars whizzing by along Weedpatch Highway.

"They are right across the street from a refinery that emits black smoke flares and occasionally loud noises," she said. "There's no alert system, so sometimes when folks see smoke and hear loud noises, they don't know what to do and get scared."

So far, 16 of the wells have reportedly been fixed by their operators. But a representative of Los Gatos-based Sunray Petroleum Inc., owner of 11 of the leaky wells, has said it is not responsible for repairing the remaining leaks.

CalGEM spokesman Jacob Roper said earlier this month the agency is "working on an emergency contract to have those wells fixed as soon as possible." The repairs, Roper added, will be paid for out of industry fees. The agency this month issued notices of violations to Sunray and another ***oil*** company, threatening civil penalties if they did not fix the leaks.

Last year, inspectors discovered 45 ***oil*** wells belonging to five different companies that were leaking methane around Bakersfield.

In response to concerns expressed at Tuesday's board meeting, Lorelei Oviatt, director of ***Kern***'s Planning and Natural Resources Department, said the county's options are limited.

"This is an unfortunate issue," Oviatt said. "Your board's previous ordinance, which was set aside by the court — and many of the people who have testified today are part of the lawsuit that set that aside — gave your board full enforcement power to force these (wells) to be cleaned up."

She maintained that the leaks are CalGEM's responsibility to handle because the county's ordinance has been put on hold due to pending litigation.

CalGEM has a fund for orphan wells "and we are supposed to be a priority," Oviatt said. "If your board would like us to send another letter to remind CalGEM that this is 100% their responsibility, (we can), since our ordinance is in abeyance until the appeals courts take action."

Cesar Aguirre, ***oil*** and gas director for the Central California Environmental Justice Network, agreed the county should submit a second letter to CalGEM, if only to "put pressure" on them.

"We would love to have another letter sent to CalGEM because that is, at times, what is needed," Aguirre said. "They knew about these wells, they just didn't inspect them until the governor sent his task force down here."

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