# **CALIFORNIA FILES PROTEST TO BLOCK BLM OIL & GAS LEASE SALE IN KERN COUNTY**

Inside Cal/EPA

November 13, 2020

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**Length:** 939 words

**Body**

Posted November 11, 2020

Several California state agencies and a coalition of environmental groups are protesting the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM) planned sale of seven ***oil*** and gas leases in ***Kern*** County, renewing prior arguments that federal officials are failing to comply with environmental protection requirements.

Even if the Trump administration's BLM approves the lease sales next month, environmentalists are hopeful that the incoming Biden administration will revoke them next year.

"Time and time again, the Trump Administration has worked outside the bounds of the law to advance the interests of industry polluters," said California Attorney General Xavier Becerra (D) in a Nov. 9 press release announcing his protest filing on behalf of Gov. Gavin Newsom (D), the California Air Resources Board, and the California Department of Fish & Wildlife.

"BLM is recklessly jamming through the sale of ***oil*** and gas leases in ***Kern*** County using a flawed environmental analysis that is being challenged in court. Rest assured, we'll do whatever it takes to protect our public lands and uphold the rule of law," Becerra added.

Additionally, 10 conservation, environmental justice, health and community groups, led by the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD), filed a separate Nov. 9 protest letter on BLM's lease sale plans.

"We're not going to let the Trump administration sell off our beautiful public lands for ***oil*** execs to drill and frack their way to climate catastrophe," said Kassie Siegel, director of the CBD's Climate Law Institute, in a Nov. 9 press release. "The accelerating climate crisis means more heat waves, fires, floods and suffering unless we keep fossil fuels in the ground where they belong, including on our public lands."

BLM on Oct. 8 issued a proposal to hold a lease auction on Dec. 10 involving seven parcels totaling 4,133 acres of federal lands and mineral estate within the boundaries of its Bakersfield Field Office in ***Kern*** County. Written comments were due Nov. 9.

BLM's plan to manage drilling and hydraulic fracturing in the region is being challenged in court by a coalition environmental groups that includes CBD. The groups charge that the plan's supplemental environmental impact statement (SEIS) fails to adequately assess and mitigate adverse environmental and health impacts in violation of the National Environmental Policy Act.

Becerra is also challenging the BLM plan in a separate pending suit.

CBD plans to file another lawsuit if the lease sale goes forward, according to a source with the group. And "if ground disturbing activities appear imminent, we will certainly consider [seeking] a preliminary injunction."

Becerra's office says that more than 95 percent of federal drilling in California occurs in ***Kern*** County, "often in close proximity to California's most vulnerable communities."

Instead of "conducting a detailed environmental analysis of the leases, BLM is relying on a flawed programmatic environmental review finalized in December 2019 that opened more than 1 million acres of public lands in Central California to ***oil*** and gas drilling," the release adds. Environmental Claims

California officials allege BLM's SEIS must be revised because it significantly underestimates the percentage of new wells that would be drilled using fracking; ignores recent studies and best available science in evaluating fracking impacts; does not consider or attempt to mitigate the impacts of ***oil*** and gas development on nearby environmental justice communities; fails to analyze the proposed drilling for consistency with California state standards and policies, including California's statutory targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions; fails to adequately analyze groundwater impacts; and fails to adequately consider or mitigate the significant climate impacts of new ***oil*** and gas leasing, the release says.

A BLM spokeswoman did not provide a comment by press time.

Rock Zierman, CEO of the California Independent Petroleum Association, says in an email comment that previous lawsuits filed by "extremists" put the lease offerings "on hold for eight years until a scientific review was complete. That review, along with other separate studies commissioned by the state, found no negative environmental impacts due to responsible ***oil*** and natural gas production. Either they like science, or they don't."

Further, if "production on these lands is conducive to hydraulic fracturing, it would have to face approval by the state since there is a separate permitting process for well stimulation which currently requires additional review by the Lawrence Livermore National Lab," Zierman says.

In addition, he argues that expanding ***oil*** and gas production in California through new lease offerings "benefits both the economy and environment. California ***oil*** is produced under the world's strictest environmental regulations, provides affordable and reliable energy to consumers, and generates significant revenue for government to fund public programs. California's reliance on imported ***oil*** has quadrupled in two decades. Every barrel we don't produce here must be tankered into our crowded ports from foreign countries. It's unclear to me why the governor and attorney general want to continue to increase imports from Saudi Arabia."

The CBD source says that even if BLM approves the lease sales next month, the agency "can invalidate any lease that was 'improperly issued.' If the Trump administration goes through with the illegal sale, then any leases sold will have been improperly issued, and we would hope and expect the Biden administration to revoke them." -- Curt Barry (cbarry@iwpnews.com)

**Load-Date:** November 13, 2020

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