# **CALIFORNIA: Kern County OKs plan for new oil and gas wells**

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A plan to fast-track drilling of thousands of new ***oil*** and gas wells over the next 15 years in California's prime ***oil*** patch was approved yesterday by ***Kern*** County officials over objections by environmental groups. The ***Kern*** County Board of Supervisors voted 5-0 to approve a revised ordinance supported by the influential petroleum industry that creates a blanket environmental impact report to approve as many as 2,700 new wells a year. The revision was necessary after a state appeals court ruled last year that a 2015 ordinance violated the California Environmental Quality Act by not fully evaluating or disclosing environmental damage that could occur from drilling. New drilling permits were not issued while the county returned to the drawing board.

County Planning Director Lorelei Oviatt said the new plan, which now fills 72 binders of documents, made 87 revisions, including creating larger buffers between homes and wells, muffling noise during drilling, and putting a stricter limit on the number of new wells. The 2015 ordinance would have allowed up to 72,000 wells, but with a lower cap on annual approvals, that number is now reduced to about 43,000 new wells in the 20-year period ending in 2035. "What we project is the worst-case scenario on many issues," Oviatt said, adding that actual permit numbers in recent years were below the cap. Hundreds of people spoke by phone in favor of or against the ordinance or in voicemails played during a daylong public hearing livestreamed from the board's Bakersfield chambers. Petroleum producers, ***oil*** company workers, and industry and business groups spoke in favor of the measure, saying it would support high-paying jobs and produce ***oil*** under some of the most stringent environmental laws, instead of relying on dirtier imports. Catherine Reheis-Boyd, president of the Western States Petroleum Association, said the group supported the plan because it provided certainty by streamlining the process even though it had "introduced many new restrictive and costly requirements and mitigation measures." Environmentalists, residents and one farmer opposed the ordinance, saying it would clear the way to rubber-stamp permits and does not address concerns spelled out by a unanimous 5th District Court of Appeal in Fresno. In a joint statement, several local environmental leaders said they will continue the fight by calling on state lawmakers and regulators to pass measures that would bar wells near homes, schools and hospitals. Many opponents, including several people speaking Spanish, spoke about how more ***oil*** drilling would exacerbate the notoriously bad air pollution in the San Joaquin Valley and make asthma cases worse. Mercedes Macias, a local resident and a Sierra Club member, said ***oil*** production caused pollution responsible for a variety of health ailments that hit Latino, Black and Indigenous people disproportionately. "It is ludicrous to think that a singular environmental impact report can adequately determine the health impacts of ***oil*** and gas drilling," she said. "The people of ***Kern*** County should not be sacrificed for profit. ***Oil*** executives would have you believe that the only way to see our community prosper is through continued dependence on the ***oil*** industry. That is not true." But supervisors argue that the local ***oil*** and gas industry had both financial and environmental benefits. Supervisor Leticia Perez said the ***oil*** and gas industry has represented a way out of "the incredible shame and degradation of intergenerational poverty," especially for Latino families. Supervisor Zack Scrivner said opponents aren't counting the environmental costs of bringing in foreign ***oil*** by truck, ship or pipeline. "Why would we import more when we can produce it here safely and cleaner than anyone else in the world?" he asked. ***Kern*** County, about 100 miles north of Los Angeles, is the state's leading fossil fuel producer and a major agricultural area. About 1 in 7 workers in the county of 900,000 has a job tied to the ***oil*** industry. -- Brian Melley, Associated Press

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