# **Environmental justice activists want seat at table in Kern, state's oil debate**

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**Body**

Dec. 12-- Dec. 12--Local environmental justice advocates say they want their voices heard as ***Kern***'s Board of Supervisors looks to make the case in Sacramento that halting California ***oil*** production would devastate the county's economy.

Acvitists' move to inject themselves into the process may cloud the board's pro-***oil*** message. But it was unclear whether they will have a role beyond that of any other observer speaking during the public comment period of a government proceeding.

Members of a coalition of environmental justice groups say they feel overlooked amid a campaign focused explicitly on supporting ***Kern***'s most important industry. They assert that drilling for petroleum endangers the health of poor and largely immigrant neighborhoods living near local ***oil*** fields.

"In ***Kern*** County, the belly of the beast, we need to be aware (that) just because you're several miles away doesn't mean you're not going to be impacted by small particle pollution," said Rosanna Esparza, a local gerontologist researching the impact ***oil*** and gas drilling has on people 65 years and older.

She and Juan Flores, a community organizer for the Delano-based Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment, said it's important that county supervisors represent not only the ***oil*** industry but also the communities who live near and are affected by ***oil*** production.

Flores noted the environmental justice community has spoken up before following two troubling ***oil***-related incidents in ***Kern***.

The first of these involved residents' reports of illness following ***oil*** drilling activity in the Shafter area in 2012. The second came after a gas pipeline leak forced the evacuation of three dozen Arvin residents in 2014.

Flores said it might be premature to end ***oil*** production altogether, considering the large number of workers the industry employs locally. But he said it might be appropriate to establish a buffer between production areas and nearby homes and other sensitive sites.

"If we can start with a buffer zone, that would be fantastic," he said.

When Gov. Gavin Newsom announced a three-prong approach last month to expand his crackdown on the state's ***oil*** industry, has said the state will soon consider new protections for people living near production sites.

More generally, Newsom has said California must work to reduce the state's ***oil*** supply and demand as it works toward a goal of carbon neutrality by 2045.

On Tuesday, the county board voted 5-0 to support a plan proposed by Second District Supervisor Zack Scrivner that would begin by inviting the industry to explain how the governor's anti-***oil*** push would affect business.

The county initiative would also organize a coalition in support of the industry. The idea is to send the coalition to Sacramento to speak about the industry's importance to local families and neighborhoods. If necessary, the board would consider declaring an "economic crisis" caused by the ***oil*** crackdown.

Scrivner said Thursday he and other senior county officials had not received any requests by local activists for a special role in the process. Nevertheless, he said, he always appreciates constituents' viewpoints.

Members of the public will be invited to speak during two parts of the process, he said. One will be in January, when the board expects to receive a presentation by state ***oil*** regulators.

Scrivner said the other opportunity for the public to address the board about the ***oil*** initiative would be when supervisors receive staff input on the industry's local impact.

Two senior, non-elected leaders in county government did not respond to request for comment Thursday.

John Cox can be reached at 661-395-7404. Follow him on Twitter: @TheThirdGraf. Sign up at Bakersfield.com for free newsletters about local business.

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