# **Kern proposes fixes to oil permitting system**

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**Body**

Jul. 24—Regulatory patches are being proposed to bring ***Kern***'s ***oil*** and gas permitting system up to the state's environmental standard and potentially let the county resume approving new drilling.

A public notice the county paid to have published Thursday listed four steps intended to fix holes in the county's blanket environmental review as identified in early June by ***Kern*** County Superior Court Judge Gregory Pulskamp. That was after the judge halted local permitting in October, returning review authority to the state and effectively restraining production in the heart of California ***oil*** country.

The notice set an Aug. 23 public hearing of the county Board of Supervisors, and a public workshop Aug. 1, on a proposal that would require removal of idle oilfield equipment on certain ***oil*** permits on farmland. Another "mitigation measure" proposed to soften the industry's local impact would adopt a regional agreement on fine particulate pollution; two others would remove then replace a community drinking water grant program.

"***Kern*** County is committed to environmentally protective ***oil*** and gas permitting in full compliance with the California Environmental Quality Act," Lorelei Oviatt, director of the county's Planning and Natural Resources Department, said in a statement. She added that details will be disclosed in a staff report due for release Aug. 18.

A coalition of environmental groups opposed to the county's permitting system declined to comment on the hearing notice. Even so, it seems unlikely they will drop their objections, considering that since 2015 environmental justice advocates and anti-***oil*** activists around the state have condemned the county's permitting efforts as opening the door to vast new drilling and local pollution.

Last week's public notice was, in a sense, a predictable step in the county's stated plan to continue refining the environmental review, its legal expenses funded by the industry, until every legally legitimate concern has been addressed.

Unlike the state's slower, well-by-well review process, ***Kern***'s system allowed ***oil*** producers to get permits over the counter as long as they abided by local regulations and paid substantial fees to help compensate for the pollution their activities caused.

The zoning ordinance was in effect for more than four years until an appellate court suspended permitting in early 2020. The county enacted changes before putting a revised system in place early last year, only to have Judge Pulskamp rule the county had to stop until its changes could be reviewed by the court.

His June rulings represented a mixed result for the county, giving it victories on several issues but requiring still more work in the areas of fine particulates, removal of old oilfield equipment and investment in drinking water infrastructure in disadvantaged communities.

The county's notice of public hearing refers to changes affecting each of those concerns. Ultimately, it will be up to the judicial system to decide whether ***Kern*** has done enough to meet the terms of CEQA.

A public workshop on the county's proposed changes is scheduled for 1:30 p.m. Aug. 1 in the ***Kern*** County Public Services Building, 2700 M St.

The permitting system's environmental assessment is available for review online at https://kernplanning.com/environmental-doc/***oil***-and-gas-sreir/. Comments, questions and requests for information should be directed to Cindi Hoover, by phone at 661-862-8629 or by mail: ***Kern*** County Planning and Natural Resources Department, Attention Cindi Hoover, 2700 M St., Suite 100, Bakersfield, Calif., 93301.

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