# **Some oil field violations linger for years in Kern**

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**Body**

Jun. 24—Serious ***oil*** field violations flagged as many as four years ago by state regulators in ***Kern*** County remain unresolved, according to a new analysis of publicly available data that raises questions about California's commitment or ability to address leaky wells and other problems of concern to local communities.

Data posted by the California Geologic Energy Management Division shows 14 violations cited by the agency in 2019 — petroleum leaks, spills, unauthorized releases and the like — are still active. Forty-nine more remain unsettled since 2020, along with 88 from 2021, an analysis by Los Angeles-based CJM Petroleum Consulting Inc. indicates.

The totals do not include lesser citations for things like missing signage. Counting those, CJM found, the county total from 2019 alone rises to 223, excluding violations attributed to ***oil*** field operators that are either bankrupt or inactive.

Industry representatives emphasize that violations are the exception for ***oil*** field operators that, as a whole, work closely with regulators to resolve leaks and other problems.

But the data is a reminder of difficulties the state faces in ensuring compliance about a month after state and regional inspectors found methane leaking from 27 ***oil*** wells in the Arvin-Lamont area, or 40% of those tested.

About half those leaks were repaired by their operators almost immediately. To address the rest, CalGEM issued notices of violations to two companies deemed responsible for wells that continued to emit methane, one of which has reportedly fixed both its leaks. The other, Los Gatos-based Sunray Petroleum Inc., has denied responsibility for the facilities because it no longer owns them, even as CalGEM insists the company is not relieved of its responsibility for them "until the wells are safely plugged and sealed to protect public health and the environment."

Assemblywoman Jasmeet Bains, D-Bakersfield, raised concern about the well leaks earlier this month, telling Gov. Gavin Newsom in a June 9 letter their repair must become top priority for the sake of local residents worried about health and safety implications.

She said by email Friday that notices of violations issued by CalGEM "are only useful if they cause violations to be corrected."

"There are good actors and bad actors in every industry," Bains wrote, adding, "The bad actors are dragging their feet, refusing to take responsibility, and making excuse after excuse."

"It is ridiculous that bad actors like Sunray can repeatedly ignore CalGEM's notices and warnings to fix their old ***oil*** wells, while at the same time, CalGEM is approving permits for them to drill new wells. ... We need the governor to give CalGEM clear direction that it is time to hold bad actors accountable for illegal pollution and willful noncompliance."

CalGEM spokeswoman Christine Jimenez said by email last week the agency continues to focus on strengthening its regulatory oversight and actions to increase compliance, and that "the division's field inspection program and enforcement efforts are central to this."

If a CalGEM inspection discovers a law is being broken, Jimenez wrote, the agency issues a notice of violation and provides the operator an opportunity to come into compliance. She noted companies that don't promptly address the violation face escalating enforcement actions, such as issuing a civil penalty, remedial order or a directive to permanently seal the well.

When no operator can be identified to fix the problem, leaving an immediate threat to public health and the environment, she added, CalGEM exerts its remedial authority and hires contractors repair the well. That step was planned in the case of Sunray's 11 leaky wells in and around Arvin.

Two ***oil*** industry trade groups said their members cooperate with regulators to avoid violations in the first place.

Without commenting on CalGEM's enforcement actions, the Western States Petroleum Association noted it is actively working with the agency to identify efficient ways to meet many of the state's new statutory requirements.

"WSPA's upstream members (***oil*** producers) take compliance with existing regulations and laws seriously, and work proactively to avoid any situations that would result in noncompliance," the trade group said in an email.

CEO Rock Zierman of the second group, the California Independent Petroleum Association, said by email its members collaborate closely with local, state and federal agencies to ensure compliance with law and streamline operations.

"Considering the oversight of over 25 government agencies on our operations, there is little room for noncompliance," Zierman stated.

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