

Get answers on ‘fracking’

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Last weekend’s fast-moving storm was the first significant June rainfall on the Central Coast in nearly three-quarters of a century. It follows a wet winter that filled up local reservoirs.

With all that rain in recent months, it seems inconceivable that anyone would worry about the local water supply. One of California’s little quirks, however, is that no matter how flush you may think you are, some kind of catastrophe is just around the next blind curve.

Perhaps that’s why homeowners near Vandenberg Air Force Base are so concerned about the underground activities of Venoco Oil. They’ve alerted Santa Barbara County officials to a potential problem with Venoco’s use of hydraulic fracturing to get oil out of two wells in Careaga Canyon.

Hydraulic fracturing is more commonly referred to as “fracking.” It involves pumping highly pressurized liquid into a well hole, thus breaking apart surrounding rock formations deep in the ground, which frees up the crude oil so it can be brought to the surface.

The process is used when crude or natural gas is hard to get to, or when a well isn’t being particularly productive.

The problem with fracking — at least for nearby private property owners — is that the liquid being pumped down to crack the rocks has the potential to contaminate nearby ground water.

County officials are worried enough about Venoco’s fracking operations that they have filed two notices of violation against the company for “water flooding,” charges company officials have denied. All of which puts this in the he-said/she-said category of accusation and denial.

County officials and homeowners need answers to the questions about fracking, and Venoco’s denials are an insufficient response to what are legitimate concerns about a process that is fairly common in the oil industry, but which also has caused problems and controversy elsewhere.

The issue will be discussed at today’s Board of Supervisors’ meeting, at which Venoco needs to be able to provide assurances that its efforts to extract oil aren’t destroying ground-water sources that will be needed in the future.

Wet winters are far from a sure thing in California.