

Fracking Takes Flak as Santa Barbara County Supervisors Explore Oil, Gas Drilling Regulations

Opponents raise concerns over extraction process known as hydraulic fracturing

Lara Cooper and Daniel Langhorne, Santa Barbara Noozhawk, 6-8-11

The Santa Barbara County Board of Supervisors took a long look at the oil and gas industry's practice of hydraulic fracturing Tuesday. While the process may not be a household term, there was plenty of opinion about the matter — for and against.

Hydraulic fracturing, often called “fracking,” is used to extract trapped oil and gas by injecting fluid into a well bore at pressures that exceed the strength of the rock confining the oil and gas. To enhance the effectiveness, drilling companies have added a variety of chemicals to the liquid being injected.

Opponents of hydraulic fracturing cite concerns about groundwater quality while supporters say fracking can reach energy reserves that are inaccessible by other methods.

Some of the chemicals used in the process are toxic but several companies consider the mixtures to be confidential trade secrets in the highly competitive industry.

The California Division of Oil, Gas & Geothermal Resources has statutory authority to regulate fracking, but it doesn't require reporting to track the different methods or the fluids injected into the ground. The practice is also largely exempt from the U.S. Safe Drinking Water Act, except when diesel fuel is used as the fracking agent.

The practice was recently employed by Venoco Inc. in two wells near Los Alamos. County staff say the company conducted the fracking without proper authorization and two notices of violation were sent to the company in May.

Santa Barbara County regulations don't specifically address hydraulic fracturing, but a discretionary Oil Drilling and Production Plan is required for any oil or gas drilled in an inland area within a state field that uses groundwater as a means of flooding a subsurface formation. Venoco denies it violated any county land-use codes or permits for the two wells, maintains that the notices are flawed and has asked that they be withdrawn.

Venoco's alleged violations weren't the subject of Tuesday's item before the Board of Supervisors, however. Instead, the board looked at a more general picture of fracking regulations in the county.

Third District Supervisor Doreen Farr said she brought the item before the board because she's received letters of concern from constituents, primarily addressing water quality. The supervisors received a report on the topic Tuesday and will revisit the issue at their Aug. 2 meeting.

First District Supervisor Salud Carbajal said he's “not one to be caught up in the hysteria,” but added that the topic was a concern for him. The movie *Gasland* was brought up multiple times during the meeting, and Carbajal said such portrayals of fracking paint an unsavory picture.

“Fiction or nonfiction, they are really disturbing,” he said.

Fifth District Supervisor Steve Lavagnino took a different approach.

“Before we go out and get our torches and pitchforks,” he said, “we’ve got to get away from hypotheticals.”

Doug Anthony of the county Energy Division ran through a presentation of how the hydraulic fracturing process works.

During Anthony’s comments, it was pointed out that there have been complaints from residents about an odor coming from the area around the wells, and 2nd District Supervisor Janet Wolf confirmed that she also had received emails from residents. The county Air Pollution Control District investigated and found that Venoco had left open several tanks used to clean off the well bores, and the the acidic mixture used had caused the smell.

Terry Dressler, director and air pollution control officer, said the district doesn’t require any specific permitting for the chemicals that Venoco is using. Anything that becomes a public nuisance, however, like the strong smell reported by residents, can be addressed by the agency. Venoco has not disclosed its list of chemicals used in the company’s fracking process, said Dressler, who added that everything under the ground is regulated by the state Division of Oil, Gas & Geothermal Resources anyway.

Nearly 20 speakers came forward during the supervisors’ meeting, the majority of whom expressed concern about fracking and its impacts on groundwater. Two attorneys representing ranching families in the area surrounding the well, said ground wells are the only water source for people living nearby. Lindsey Reed, who also lives in the area, expressed concern about agricultural operations, including large swaths of land used as vineyards. Keeping water chemical free was crucial, Reed said.

Speakers from communities that haven’t experienced fracking said they were alarmed, as well.

“Carpinteria is scared,” said Vera Benson, who reminded the board that exactly one year ago Carpinteria voters had overwhelmingly rejected a Venoco ballot initiative, known as Measure J, to slant drill on the South Coast.

“We voted down Measure J because of these unanswered questions,” she said.

Hydraulic fracturing had its supporters, though.

Blair Knox, public affairs director of the California Independent Petroleum Association, spoke in favor of the practice. Venoco officials chose to let its trade association speak for the company.

Tupper Hall, vice president of strategic communications at the Western States Petroleum Association, noted that “a great deal of misinformation and misunderstanding” surrounded Tuesday’s discussion.

“I think it’s fair to say the operations that take place are highly regulated,” he said, adding that fracking was an “intelligent and safe practice.”

Wolf said she’d like to see county staff tighten up an inspection plan for all drilling sites in the county, and require companies that are planning to extract oil and gas through fracking to provide a workplan before there’s a problem.

“This is potentially affecting our citizens,” she said. “We need to get a handle on this as soon as possible.”