

Santa Barbara County looks at 'fracking' for oil

Noaki Schwartz, Associated Press, 6-8-11

LOS ALAMOS, Calif. -- Residents who live along one of the most scenic swaths of California coastline pleaded Tuesday with Santa Barbara County officials to do everything they can to protect the county from a controversial oil drilling technique that has been blamed elsewhere for contaminating groundwater and causing air pollution.

Following the discovery that an oil company is using hydraulic fracturing - or fracking - in the heart of Santa Barbara wine country, officials held a hearing to learn more about the practice.

The petroleum industry claims the technique of extracting hard-to-reach gas and oil by pummeling rocks deep underground with high-pressure water, sand and chemicals has been safely used for decades.

But environmental groups, ranchers and some residents of the region aren't reassured. They spoke out against fracking at the meeting, taking aim at the state agency that oversees drilling and has admitted it does not know where and how often fracking occurs in California because it is not regulating the practice.

"I agree with the fact-based decision-making, but you can't make decisions without the facts," said Brian Segee, an attorney with the Environmental Defense Center.

The discovery that fracking has quietly been going on for years in one of the largest oil-producing states has galvanized oil foes and led to proposed state legislation that would require companies to disclose the chemicals they use, the amount of water they're pumping and where they are fracking.

That came as welcome news to Steve Lyons, who doesn't own the mineral rights on his ranch in the little town of Los Alamos and has been trying to get a precise list of chemicals that Denver-based Venoco Inc. has been injecting so he can test his water.

Lyons' 2,500-acre ranch just off a rural two-lane highway unfurls into a lush valley of grape vines and oak trees.

"They won't tell us what the chemicals are because they say it's proprietary," he said.

The Department of Conservation's Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources, which oversees drilling, has said budget constraints have prevented it from developing regulations to address the practice.

While the agency requires drilling permits and enforces groundwater protections, once those permits are acquired, drillers are allowed to employ techniques such as fracking to get the oil out of the ground without additional reporting.

Legislators have introduced a bill that supporters say would be among the most stringent fracking laws in the country if passed. The bill passed the Assembly last week and is headed into a state Senate committee. Similar proposals are under consideration elsewhere, including Texas and Montana.

Industry officials say hydraulic fracturing is one of many techniques used since the 1940s, and concerns are overblown. With the days of easily accessible oil and gas gone, companies are relying on deeper-drilling

techniques more often.

Tupper Hulls, spokesman for the Western States Petroleum Association told Santa Barbara supervisors there is no evidence that fracking has harmed groundwater.

"The operations on a drilling site are heavily regulated," he said. "Hydraulic fracturing is an intelligent and safe practice."

Still, some county supervisors criticized the industry for not disclosing the list of chemicals being used and reacted negatively after watching an industry generated video explaining the technique.

Drilling issues have long been part of the consciousness in Santa Barbara, where a massive gusher off the coast in 1969 is credited with helping to spearhead the modern environmental movement.

"I'm thinking in 10 or 15 years people are going to look at this and think what is wrong with you people?" said Supervisor Janet Wolf, shaking her head. "It looks like it's such a devastating process on our environment."

Proponents of the practice say the fracking fluids are mostly water and only 0.5 percent chemicals, but some of those chemicals can be toxic.

While the state does not currently track where and when fracking occurs, experts say they believe it's also been used in Monterey, Kern, Ventura and Los Angeles counties. In the Baldwin Hills area of Los Angeles, residents blame fracking for a variety of health problems and for causing their homes to shift and crack.

Michael G. Edwards, vice president of corporate relations for Venoco Inc., the company whose fracking sparked the Santa Barbara County meeting, referred some questions to industry groups and declined to comment on specific questions from The Associated Press on drilling in Santa Barbara.

The county has issued the company a notice of violation after it fracked two wells.

Edwards said the company had secured all of the required permits and isn't the first to frack in Santa Barbara County, saying the technique has been used at other wells for at least 25 years. Edwards also said the state requires wells to be encased in steel and cemented into place to protect fresh water, and the wells are almost two miles below the surface and fresh water zones.

For many residents, farmers and ranchers, however, the risks to their water supply seemed to outweigh the rewards.

"It's not as simple as environmentalists v. oil companies," said Bob Field, a San Ynez resident. "We're all dependent on that resource."