

# Tracking the Fracking

## *Officials and Public Take Hard Look at Controversial Drilling Method*

**Ethan Stewart, Santa Barbara Independent, 6-9-11**

It's been a month since news broke that Venoco Energy was using controversial "fracking" techniques to harvest crude oil from Los Alamos wells. This week, very much in response to that news, which caught regulatory agencies off guard, the county supervisors held an informational hearing on hydraulic fracturing. "Our primary concern," explained Supervisor Doreen Farr, "is any effect [the fracking] might have on the groundwater, especially for Los Alamos."

To that end, Doug Anthony, deputy director of County Planning and Development, provided the supes with a report detailing controversies and environmental concerns surrounding the oil-extraction technique. ("Fracking" involves fracturing underground shale surrounding an oil well and injecting a chemical/water/sand mixture into the cracks to help facilitate the flow of oil.) Anthony also addressed the many regulatory agencies involved, the oil industry's opinion on the topic, and the various bits of pending legislation at the state and the federal levels geared to get a better handle on fracking and mitigate any potential environmental nastiness (generally related to water tables being polluted) associated with the process.

The public also turned up on Tuesday, the vast majority of them — which included residents from Los Alamos and representatives from several enviro outfits — speaking out against the use of fracking. In the end, the supes continued the discussion, but not before certain members voiced grave concern about the potential pitfalls of the oil removal process and the apparent lack of current oversight and understanding.

Interestingly enough, county staff had issued two Notice of Violations (NOV) to Venoco for alleged infringements of Land-Use Development Code as it pertains to the two now-fracked wells after hearing about the fracking and doing a bit of investigation late last month. (Some of Tuesday's testimony came from people whose leased properties were fracked without their knowing it.) Venoco, for its part, reports that while the fracking has stopped and the company has no immediate plans to resume it, they did nothing wrong in the first place and, as such, their lawyers have formally requested that the NOVs be dropped.

The fracking discussion is scheduled to continue at the Board of Supervisors on August 2 when a representative from the state's Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources will be present to answer questions.