

# County Curious About Venoco's Oil-Extraction Techniques

## *Company Fracking on Two North County Leases*

**Ethan Stewart, Santa Barbara Independent, 5-5-11**

As far as the County of Santa Barbara was concerned, “fracking” was a potential problem plaguing nearly every other oil and gas harvesting community in the nation except ours. That is until now. With the recent discovery by county energy’s Doug Anthony that the common yet controversial oil-and-gas-extraction technique is, in fact, being used by the folks from Venoco Inc. on two separate leases in the North County, 3rd District County Supervisor Doreen Farr took the matter public at the start of this week’s supervisors’ hearing.

Asking for a full presentation on the subject to the board from staff early next month, Farr said simply, “I’ve learned that the activity they call fracking is actually taking place in our county right now. ... This issue has been in the news a lot lately, and I think a simple information presentation would be beneficial to both the board and the public.”

Technically known as hydraulic fracturing, fracking is a way of getting crude, natural gas, or even water, from places deep within the Earth that typically aren’t very productive. It involves pumping pressurized liquid into wellbore at such a rate that the pressure beneath becomes so great that the surrounding rock cracks and the oil flows up and out at a greater rate than normal. While fracking has been fairly typical in certain types of drilling situations since the mid 20th century, alarm has risen in recent years about the toll that such practices take on the surrounding environment.

Specifically, the fear is that the liquid pumped into wells during fracking — the ingredients of which are often industry-guarded secrets and, depending on whom you ask, can include a wild blend of chemicals, many of which are considered toxic — can seep into water tables or slowly creep back up to the surface and pollute. There is also concern about how to properly dispose of fracking fuel once the work is done. All this being said, it is also important to note that, though a more conclusive federal investigation is currently underway, the Environmental Protection Agency ruled in 2004 that the process was essentially safe.

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According to Anthony, it was only after a public outcry in Monterey County about a Venoco-proposed fracking operation in the Hames Valley that he learned such an activity was already underway here in Santa Barbara. After doing a bit of research, Anthony found that Venoco is using fracking at two separate leases, on private land, just off Highway 135 near Vandenberg Air Force Base. “They are doing it pretty deep,” he put it, “like 11,000 to 12,000 feet [beneath the surface].” Anthony added, “In this case, [Venoco] did it without telling us. ... And they have been resisting [providing more information].”

Asked if the lack of disclosure was a potentially illegal misstep on Venoco’s part or simply a flaw in the permitting process, Anthony explained that the two sides were “still working through that” but that the current county onshore drilling application does not have fracking-specific language — something that he has designs on changing in the future. In the meantime, according to Anthony, the county will consult with the state’s Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources (DOGGR) as to what, if any, potential new environmental

review would be required given the location of the wells and the use of hydraulic fracturing. “So far, DOGGR seems to think it is going to be okay,” summed up Anthony.

For their part, a spokesperson from Venoco opted not to talk specifically about the Santa Barbara situation on Tuesday afternoon and instead referred all questions on the matter to the California Independent Petroleum Association. The latter could not be contacted by deadline.

The supervisors are tentatively scheduled to explore the fracking issue at their June 7 meeting.