

Planning commission OKs fracking permit ordinance

Catherine Shen, Santa Barbara News-Press, 11-10-11

An ordinance clarifying the permitting procedures for hydraulic fracturing was approved Wednesday by the Santa Barbara County Planning Commission.

Hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, is used to obtain oil or gas trapped in relatively impermeable rock and sand formations. The process involves pumping fluids under high pressure through the well to fracture rock thousands of feet below the surface, stimulating the flow of oil or gas into the well.

The county Board of Supervisors has directed amendments to the zoning code that would require producers to obtain an oil drilling and production plan, approved by the Planning Commission on a case-by-case basis, to conduct fracking.

The Planning Commission's action Wednesday recommended the ordinance for adoption by the Board of Supervisors.

"This will help make clear the first steps toward the process," said Doug Anthony, deputy director of North County Development Review, "and avoid inadvertent errors and subsequent controversy."

During the past few months, supervisors have been presented briefings about the little-known process, due to a local discovery that an oil producer had conducted fracking in two oil wells north of Los Alamos.

The two wells were permitted with land use permits but that did not include authorization of hydraulic fracturing.

The process used more than 200,000 gallons of groundwater from the overdrafted San Antonio groundwater basin and chemicals were stored onsite and used in the fracking fluid, Mr. Anthony said.

Although fracking has been around for more than 60 years, concerns have been raised by environmentalists and local landowners about whether or not the chemicals used in the fluids used in the process pose a threat to the environment and public health.

Mr. Anthony said water is a typical component of the fracking fluid, along with about 5 percent sand to hold the fractures open, in addition to different chemicals that are used for a variety of reasons, such as corrosion prevention.

A host of issues have been brought up, Mr. Anthony said, such as whether the pressure to fracture the formation becomes high enough to reach groundwater.

Christopher Wrather, owner of Cottonwood Ranch, wrote a letter of concern to the commission.

"Water contamination would devastate our businesses, our homes and our property values," Mr. Warther said in the letter. "We are completely dependent on the availability of clean groundwater in conducting our business

and meeting our living needs and those of our employees."

Mr. Wrather emphasized regulations at the state and federal levels are inadequate and not likely to improve.

"Local government should protect us where the state and federal government have failed," he said. "Staff proposals are sensible, they would require a higher level of environmental scrutiny of fracking than currently exists, scrutiny which is entirely justified."

The California Independent Petroleum Association, which represents independent operators statewide who drill and produce oil and natural gas, declared that adding more requirements in the ordinance will do nothing to protect groundwater.

"Multiple studies over the last 40 years have shown hydraulic fracturing to be a safe and effective technique utilized to stimulate production in tight rock formation that would otherwise be un-economic," said Blair Knox, director of public affairs in a written letter to the commission.

"Groundwater is protected by a very stringent set of regulations that do not allow migration of water into groundwater aquifers no matter what completion technique is applied on a well," Mr. Knox said.

Increased regulation, cost and delay have made some projects uneconomical, he said, and the county has not adequately considered the fiscal impacts of restricting hydraulic fracturing.

"Oil assessment revenues paid by oil producers through property tax will diminish," he said, "forcing the county to look elsewhere to make up for their worsening revenue deficiencies."