

Study finds no environmental impact around Calif. oil field

Ellen M. Gilmer, *Environment and Energy Publishing*, 10-11-12

An oil and gas company operating in California is lauding the results of a study released yesterday that found hydraulic fracturing was not a threat to the environment in the Baldwin Hills area of Los Angeles County.

Plains Exploration & Production Co. (PXP) paid for an independent consultant to do the review of potential impacts as part of a 2011 lawsuit settlement with Culver City and environmental groups, which opposed PXP's use of fracking -- a method of extracting oil and gas by blasting chemical-laced water deep underground -- on two occasions in the area's Inglewood Oil Field.

The study, which was peer-reviewed by two outside specialists, addresses concerns about groundwater contamination, well integrity, earthquakes, air emissions and community health.

"In each and every category, the study did not detect significant impacts once the hydraulic fracturing had been completed," said PXP Vice President of Environmental, Health & Safety and Government Affairs Steve Rusch in a statement. "These facts are important for the community to know."

Environmentalists, meanwhile, dismiss the report as industry propaganda. The Environmental Working Group's Bill Allayaud said that the group would be looking into the study more closely but that at first glance, it appeared to track with industry talking points of the past few years.

The study, conducted by environmental consulting firm Cardno Entrix, finds that groundwater beneath the oil field is geologically isolated from the Los Angeles Basin, a drinking water source. Pre-drilling and post-drilling monitoring did not show effects from fracking, although monitoring wells found arsenic, which occurs in naturally high levels in the basin.

Regarding well integrity, the study says that tests done before, during and after fracking did not weaken the steel and cement casings that buffer oil wells from the ground. It also cited measurements of seismicity and found that fracking in the oil field had "no detectable effects on vibration, and did not induce seismicity (earthquakes)."

Finally, the consultants write that air emissions from operations in the oil field were within the standards set by the state's South Coast Air Quality Management District and that the health of residents near the oil field was statistically no different from the health of other county residents.

Dave Quast, the Los Angeles-based California director of Energy In Depth, an arm of the Independent Petroleum Association of America, said the report confirmed what regulators and industry observers have said all along.

"Scientists, senior members of the Obama administration and the state-level regulators who oversee most of the nation's oil and natural gas development have said repeatedly that hydraulic fracturing is a safe technology," he said in a statement. "This report reinforces what those experts say."

Eric Adair, a Los Angeles-based energy attorney who tracks drilling issues in the area, agreed that the results reaffirm the safety of fracking in California, but he added that he was doubtful many critics would accept the findings.

critics who say they do not trust the study because it was funded by PXP. The oil company had no choice in the matter, as the settlement last year required it to fund the report.

The 1,000-acre Inglewood Oil Field was first discovered by Standard Oil in 1924, and PXP has operated it since December 2002. Some California residents began to voice concerns about fracking as the process, combined with horizontal drilling, began to spread across the country in recent years. California does not require drillers to obtain a permit to frack, and the state has no data on how often the practice is used there.

The state does not appear poised to ban the practice, despite calls from some environmentalists. The California Department of Conservation's Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources is reviewing state oversight and plans to revise oil and gas regulations, though a timeline for that process is unclear.