

Salinas Valley watershed at risk

Ed Mitchell, Monterey County Herald, 8-23-14

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Using groundwater for oil fracking may not be an issue in arid southwest Texas. But it is a big issue in the overdrafted and drought-impacted Salinas Valley water basin if fracking operations poison 3,500 to 18,500 acre-feet of groundwater a year.

Such large-scale use and pollution of water are big enough to put the Salinas Valley watershed at risk. Here are some facts to prove this point.

For many months, Monterey Peninsula representatives have been trying to secure an agreement with Salinas Valley farmers to recycle 3,500 AFY of agriculture wastewater for use by Peninsula businesses and families. Media reports say at times it hasn't been a friendly discussion.

Meanwhile, several fracking reports set the average amount of water needed to hydraulically fracture shale zones in California at 15.34 acre-feet per well. And it is common for such wells to be fracked more than once. So in the near future having a few hundred oil fracking wells annually drilled closer and closer to Salinas would quickly consume more than the recycled wastewater the Peninsula is asking for. Thus, the water basin would suffer further overdrafting.

Such risk appeared to be one reason why the Monterey County Planning Commission in April unanimously voted for a two-year moratorium on fracking permits. After hearing the county staff report, along with supporting data supplied by myself and 22 other citizens, the commissioners voiced their concerns. They agreed that the county needed time to assess the risks from water-consuming oil operations before writing regulations needed to protect Salinas Valley farmers, families and agriculture jobs.

The soundness of the Planning Commission's recommendations to the supervisors was proven a few months later. On July 7 the California State Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources issued cease-and-desist orders to seven energy companies. DOGGR warned that the frackers might be injecting their waste into [San Joaquin] aquifers that could be a source of drinking water. The Bakersfield Californian reported the orders, saying the waste disposal "poses danger to life, health, property, and natural resources."

So before oil frackers are allowed to store thousands of acre-feet of highly-toxic fracking liquids under Salinas Valley aquifers, our supervisors must not blindly accept oil industry claims that deep storage is always safe. The supervisors need reliable evidence that future earthquakes won't create cracks allowing toxins to be pushed by pressure up into local aquifers used for irrigation and drinking.

Still not convinced that the Salinas Valley watershed faces risks from future oil extraction? Then consider last month's ruling by Monterey County Superior Court Judge Wills regarding oil operations in San Benito County — using water from Monterey County!

In that case, a 15-well test extraction project in San Benito County planned to take water from the King City area and use it to extract oil. Even though the amount of water was significantly less than hydraulic fracking operations, the judge ruled the EIR was faulty. Judge Wills determined the project failed to

assess the hydrogeologic environmental impacts downstream of King City when it was well known that the entire Salinas Valley watershed has been in a state of overdraft for many years. Plus, the river is a critical source of drinking and agricultural water in the Salinas Valley.

That decision was gratifying to those of us who have been working for nearly three years to get local stakeholders and elected officials to protect the Salinas Valley watershed from the negative impacts of hydraulic fracking.

For example, avoid the fracking-vs.-water pollution issue entirely by only allowing nonhydraulic fracking.