

State regulator is sued over new Kern oil wells

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Environmental groups and local residents are suing the state Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources for approving hundreds of new oil drilling permits in Kern County without analyzing the risks to air, water and public health as required by state law.

The Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources, also known by its acronym “DOGGR,” has issued at least 214 permits since July to Aera Energy LLC to drill new oil and gas wells in the South Belridge Oil Field in Kern County without the environmental review required by the California Environmental Quality Act, the lawsuit says.

“The California Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources is turning a blind eye to the environmental risks of oil drilling and fracking,” says Earthjustice Attorney Will Rostov. “DOGGR should not be allowed to continue rubber-stamping oil drilling activities without any environmental review, and it needs to live up to its responsibilities to protect the public and inform them about the impacts of oil drilling.”

Earthjustice filed the lawsuit Wednesday in Kern County Superior Court on behalf of Association of Irrigated Residents, the Center for Biological Diversity and the Sierra Club. Aera Energy is jointly owned by two of the world’s largest oil companies, ExxonMobil and Royal Dutch Shell. Belridge Oil Field is not new. It’s been pumped since 1911 and is currently the sixth-highest producing oil field in the U.S.

Aera Energy intends to frack at least 144 of the newly permitted wells, which requires tapping already strained water resources, says the lawsuit. Steam injection, common to Kern County’s oil fields, and water flooding techniques may also be used on other newly permitted wells.

With water supplies already depleted by the ongoing drought, the lawsuit notes that DOGGR erred by not studying whether the local water supply could sustainably provide water for well drilling and water-intensive extraction practices like fracking and steam injection.

The coalition seeks to stop drilling in what it terms the illegally permitted wells until DOGGR analyzes the project’s threats to water supplies and the risks associated with the release of air pollutants, greenhouse gases and toxic chemicals into the environment.

“State oil regulators broke the law by failing to investigate the risks of all this new oil drilling,” says Kassie Siegel of the Center for Biological Diversity. “We have a right to know how drilling and fracking threaten the air we breathe and the water we drink. Oil officials must evaluate the risks and inform the public of all the harms before approving more oil development.”

“DOGGR must consider these environmental and health effects before allowing drilling to go forward,” said Tom Frantz, president of the Association of Irrigated Residents.