

# Monterey County group launches initiative drive to ban fracking

**Dennis Taylor, Salinas Californian, 8-5-15**

A move is afoot to do what the Monterey County Board of Supervisors declined to do earlier this year – stop fracking before it reaches Monterey County.

Paula Getzelman, a founding member of the fledgling Protect Monterey County, said the organization is in a fund-raising mode now and will begin the signature-gathering process after the first of the year to place a citizens' initiative for a fracking moratorium on the November 2016 ballot.

Protect Monterey County organizers say the initiative route was prompted by failure of the Monterey County Board of Supervisors in March to enact a two-year moratorium during which time the effects of the fracking process were to be investigated. Supervisors are on a summer recess and calls placed to individual members were not immediately returned Wednesday.

“This county depends on agriculture and tourism; they are the economic drivers,” Getzelman said. “And they depend on a clean supply of water and clean air. The health of our families depend on it.”

Hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, is a method of extracting fossil fuels by increasing the flow of oil or gas from a well. This is done by injecting high-pressure water and chemicals deep into the ground into subsurface rock, effectively “fracturing” the rock and allowing more spaces for oil and gas to come through. The tactic is generally paired with horizontal drilling.

The environmental concerns are many. One concern is if the casing surrounding the well bore cracks, then water contaminated with cancer-causing chemicals can leach into groundwater that is used for crop irrigation and drinking water.

Accidents happen. In February 2014 an oil well owned by Whiting Petroleum Corp. started leaking hydraulic fracturing fluid and spewing oil at a well in North Dakota. The well lost control after blowout prevention equipment failed, and began leaking between 50 and 70 barrels (2,100 to 2,940 gallons) per day of fracking fluid.

But Sabrina Lockhart, a spokesperson for Monterey County Citizens for Energy Independence, said the oil and gas industry is one of the most regulated in the world.

"Oil production has been a vital part of the Monterey County economy for more than 60 years," Lockhart said. "California already has the strictest environmental regulations in place."

Lockhart was referring to Senate Bill 4, which was signed into law in 2013. It created the most transparent and stringent environmental protections in the country for well stimulation, Lockhart said. The law requires a number of safeguards, including mandatory public disclosure of all chemicals used in the process, regular testing of nearby drinking water sources and notification to surrounding land owners when fracking takes place.

Lockhart also pointed to the economic benefits of the oil and gas industry in Monterey County, including 1,651 jobs, \$242.4 million in business sales and \$136.6 million in state and local taxes.

Using the initiative process to address fracking when elected officials fail to do so is nothing new. Next door in San Benito County voters banned fracking in November of last year via an initiative called Measure J.

The measure was designed to prohibit fracking and related gas and oil extraction activities, as well as other “high-intensity petroleum operations,” including acid well stimulation and cyclic steam injection. It also banned any new gas or oil drilling activity – even conventional, low-intensity activity – in areas of the county zoned for residential or rural land use.

A company called Citadel Exploration, whose plan to drill up to 1,000 steam-injection wells in its Bitterwater oilfield was prevented by Measure J, filed a lawsuit against the county almost immediately after Measure J was approved, claiming that local governments in California do not have the authority to ban fracking.

But what counties do have the right to do is govern land use. What Measure J effectively does is zone out oil and gas operations. Citadel eventually dropped its lawsuit against San Benito County.

“Just thinking about that makes me want to vomit,” said Phil McPherson, chief financial officer for Citadel, when reached at his Newport Beach office Wednesday. “How would you feel if someone knocked your house down?”

McPherson declined to elaborate further.

As for working with the Monterey County Board of Supervisors, Getzelman believes the elected officials lack the political will to act.

“I don’t think they are going to take it up again,” she said.