

# Fracking poses problems for Central Valley farming, study says

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The risks posed when oil and gas exploration and production operate alongside agriculture may well have been ignored or underestimated for years, says a new study by the Pacific Institute, an Oakland-based water issues think tank.

“There is growing concern about competition for land and water, and the impacts of soil and water contamination on the food supply and health and safety of farmworkers and consumers,” says Matthew Heberger, the study’s lead author.

The disposal of oil and gas wastewater, which contains harmful chemicals, is a particular concern for agriculture. Disposal in unlined percolation pits is common in the Central Valley, the nation’s richest farming area and poses a significant risk of contaminating groundwater resources that may, in turn, be used by agriculture, says the study.

There are also serious deficiencies in the way California regulates the underground injection of wastes, says the Pacific Institute study. It says current practices are not sufficiently protective of freshwater aquifers that may be used as drinking water or to irrigate crops and water livestock.

The report also examines several important questions about the impacts of the oil and gas industry on agriculture and makes recommendations for mitigating those impacts, including:

- Does water used by the oil and gas industry deplete the amount of water available and thereby limit its use or drive up the price paid by farmers?
- How much oil-field wastewater is already being used by the agricultural sector, and what are the risks for livestock, human health, and food safety?
- Do Californians know enough about “legacy pollution” from orphaned oil wells that have contaminated soil and groundwater near farms?
- Why is information on the state’s oil and gas activities so limited, and how does that hinder proper risk management by farmers and ranchers?

“In California, government and industry can and should do a far better job of protecting public health, the environment, and the safety of food,” says Mr. Heberger.