

Supervisors directs staff to study benzene levels in oil drilling wastewater

Kathleen Wilson, Ventura County Star, 3-11-15

VENTURA, Calif. - Citing concerns over groundwater supplies, the Ventura County Board of Supervisors on Tuesday ordered a study of benzene in wastewater generated by oil drilling.

Supervisors Linda Parks and John Zaragoza asked for the study on the naturally occurring element of crude oil in light of a Los Angeles Times story that found benzene in fracking fluids at an average of 700 times the federal standard.

"That's really alarming," Zaragoza said at the board's meeting in Ventura.

In a unanimous vote, the board directed the county Resource Management Agency to examine the presence of benzene in wastewater going into disposal wells and the ocean.

Parks and Zaragoza said they wanted to examine any potential impact on public health as well as to marine life.

Benzene is classified as a carcinogen, a substance that can cause cancer.

A week ago, state regulators shut down 12 underground injection wells in Kern County to protect high-quality groundwater. State officials said they had no evidence that groundwater had been contaminated by the deposit of oil field wastewater back into the ground, but they wanted to verify that.

No problems have been reported in the county water supply either, Resource Management Director Chris Stephens told the board.

Supervisors set no deadline for the study to be completed, in recognition of the agency's workload and the lack of a staff person with expertise in the subject.

They indicated they would provide additional resources if needed amid criticism of the oversight of the state Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources.

"We have lost confidence in the state regulators," Supervisor Steve Bennett said in a brief interview after the meeting. "Our confidence is shaken enough at the state level that we are willing to do our own investigation and we're willing to pay for it."

Bennett said he was more concerned about the fluid that is injected into wells at commercial disposal sites than in wastewater that goes back into the same spot where it was drilled.

Hundreds of injection wells exist in the county, almost all of them at oil drilling operations. The only known commercial disposal site in the county with injection wells is operated by Anterra Corp. Up to 24 truckloads of oil field waste may be trucked daily into the company's site outside Oxnard.

The Santa Clara Waste Water Co. also accepted oil field waste and sent it through a pipeline to the ocean after it was treated, but that has been shut down since mid-November following an explosion and fire at the plant.