

Enviros sue Calif. county over oil wells

Ellen M. Gilmer, Environment & Energy Publishing, 11-18-15

Environmental groups in California yesterday sued local government officials for permitting oil and gas wells along a popular hiking trail.

Los Padres ForestWatch, the Center for Biological Diversity, and Citizens for Responsible Oil and Gas filed suit in Ventura County Superior Court, challenging the county Board of Supervisors' approval of 19 new oil wells along the Santa Paula Canyon Trail despite strong opposition from hikers, environmentalists and other residents.

The board's approval of the wells came after a close 3-2 vote last month. According to the environmental groups, the supervisors violated the California Environmental Quality Act by relying on a nine-page addendum to an outdated environmental impact report that does not consider the nuisance and public safety risks the new wells would pose.

"Several impacts acknowledged in the previous environmental documents have substantially increased in severity, due in part to the Project applicant's failure to undertake previously-approved mitigation measures," the petition says, "and new information has since become available regarding the Project's impacts."

The complaint notes increased risks of disturbing steelhead and California condor habitat. The lawsuit asks for new well drilling to be halted until the county conducts a new or supplemental environmental impact report.

The Santa Paula Canyon Trail, which is adjacent to some oil and gas operations already, is a gateway to waterfalls, swimming holes and backcountry campsites in the Los Padres National Forest, the groups say.

"Santa Paula Canyon is one of the crown jewels of Ventura County, with thousands of residents and visitors enjoying this wilderness destination each year," Los Padres ForestWatch Executive Director Jeff Kuyper said in a statement. "More drilling here will ruin the outdoor recreation experience while reducing local tourism dollars and harming local businesses."

Ventura County officials did not respond to a request for comment.