

# Why the federal government agreed to halt offshore oil fracking in California

**Sandy Mazza, Los Angeles Newspaper Group, 2-13-16**

For years fracking in waters off California was quietly approved without public notice or studies on potential risks to human and environmental health from tons of toxic chemicals used in the intense oil-extraction process.

But no more.

The first federal study of offshore hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, which uses greater quantities of hazardous chemicals than traditional oil extraction methods, is now underway because of a lawsuit brought by an environmental organization with offices in Los Angeles and Oakland.

In its suit filed last year against the U.S. Department of Interior's Bureau of Ocean Energy Management and Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement, the Center for Biological Diversity argued that the government illegally failed to study the environmental and human health dangers that could arise from fracking.

Specifically, the group said the lack of studies violated the Coastal Zone Management Act, the National Environmental Policy Act and the Outer Continental Shelf Lands Act.

Government officials initially denied the claims, but then agreed to settle the case on Jan. 29 under the environmental organization's terms. They are now working on a thorough environmental assessment of offshore fracking that is scheduled for completion in May. The assessment includes public comment periods, which will open when draft and final reports are released.

In the meantime, the government has temporarily halted all offshore fracking statewide. The state manages ocean waters for the three miles off its 840-mile coastline, and the federal government takes over from there.

"I see the settlement as a huge victory for California's coast and for the wildlife there because the practice of fracking has been going on in secrecy for a long time," said Miyoko Sakashita, an attorney who worked on the case and is a director at the center. "The agency didn't even know the oil companies were fracking or keeping track of it. It took a lawsuit to get them to agree to do it.

"We think the moratorium is really important and that it's vital the agency take a long hard look at this dangerous practice. We hope they end it for good."

Long Beach canceled fracking plans at oil islands just off the city's shore in December, citing the poor oil economy — not pollution or health concerns — as the reason.

The center had petitioned the California Coastal Commission in July to block fracking permits at eight existing Long Beach offshore oil wells and five new one that were granted by the state's Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources. Ultimately, city officials canceled the permits because of bottomed-out oil prices.

Modern directional-drilling methods boosted the appeal of fracking nationwide in recent years, allowing drillers to go in sideways to extract hard-to-reach oil deposits by breaking up underground rocks and ushering in a boom in domestic production.

Fracking supporters have heralded the increased economic independence from foreign oil producers, but environmentalists became increasingly worried about the laissez-faire approach from regulators, who ignored an increase in small earthquakes in areas where fracking was conducted and hundreds of unstudied chemicals used.

The Center for Biological Diversity obtained oil industry records through the Freedom of Information Act that documents 200 fracked wells in state and federal waters off Long Beach, Seal Beach, Huntington Beach and in the Santa Barbara Channel.

“The oil industry has federal permission to dump more than 9 billion gallons of wastewater, including chemical-laden fracking fluid, into the ocean off California’s coast every year,” the center’s lawsuit states. “At least 10 fracking chemicals routinely used in offshore fracking in California could kill or harm a broad variety of marine species, including sea otters and fish, the center scientists have found.”

Fracking-induced earthquakes are also of concern nationwide. Last month in Oklahoma, Sandridge Energy Inc. was ordered to shut down six wastewater disposal wells because of a huge jump in earthquakes across that state from the underground pressurized injections.

The first study of fracking-induced earthquakes in California was published this month in the journal *Geophysical Research Letters*.

The report, “Wastewater disposal and earthquake swarm activity at the southern end of the Central Valley, California,” found that fracking wastewater injections appeared to increase seismic activity when they occurred near faults and fractures. California has more pressurized fracking injections than Oklahoma.

“We think that if the government takes a hard look at offshore fracking, they’ll learn it’s an inherently dangerous process and impose mitigation measures,” Sakashita said. “We know that every frack job is really a toxic threat to the ocean and wildlife. Some of the chemicals they use are extremely dangerous.”