

Bay Area county bans nonexistent fracking

David R. Baker, San Francisco Chronicle, 7-22-16

For the first time, a Bay Area county has banned hydraulic fracturing. Even though no one fracks there.

The Alameda County Board of Supervisors voted Tuesday to ban the controversial oil and gas extraction technique, which has touched off fierce political fights across the state and country.

And yet, the company that operates Alameda County's only active oil field, just east of Livermore, does not use fracking, according to the company and a website that tracks fracked wells nationwide. Nor did the business, E&B Natural Resources of Bakersfield, have plans to frack there, according to its executives.

Still, county residents concerned that hydraulic fracturing could taint groundwater pushed for a ban anyway. With Gov. Jerry Brown opposed to a statewide moratorium or ban, environmentalists have focused their efforts on individual counties, winning bans in five so far.

"We're so excited about this," said Karen White, a Union City resident with the group Alameda County Against Fracking. "Of course we want to see this on a statewide basis. But at this point, we have to do it on a county-by-county basis. So this is a stepping-stone."

Monterey County residents will vote on a ban in November. The counties of Butte, Mendocino, San Benito and Santa Cruz have already approved fracking bans. The vast majority of hydraulic fracturing in California, however, takes place in Kern County, the center of the state's oil industry. County officials there have expressed no interest in a fracking ban.

Fracking employs a pressurized mix of water, sand and chemicals to crack underground rocks, allowing oil or natural gas to flow to the surface. Its widespread use, combined with horizontal drilling, touched off a boom in U.S. oil and gas production and helped cut petroleum prices. But concerns about its potential impact on water supplies have dogged the practice for years.

Much of the controversy surrounding fracking is because of its impact on the environment and the communities beset by fracking operations. What is that impact, and how much of it can be prevented?

Alameda County may seem like an odd battleground for the fight.

Its only active field, the Livermore Oil Field, lies southwest of the Altamont Pass. E&B operates just six active wells there, producing a total of roughly 30 barrels of oil per day. Older, plugged wells are scattered nearby. Last year, E&B reported finding a leak beneath an unused storage tank. The company ended up paying a \$10,912 fine.

E&B opposed the fracking ban, in part, because the county's initial proposal would have barred any use of acid in the wells. Although acid can be combined with fracking or used on its own to etch pathways for oil in the rocks, oil companies periodically use small amounts to clean debris and scale from their wells. They consider it an essential part of regular maintenance.

The ban adopted by the Board of Supervisors blocks the use of acid for stimulating oil production but allows it for maintenance.

"We can work with this ordinance," said Amy Roth, E&B's director of public and government affairs.

White said the ban will ensure that E&B cannot frack the Livermore field in the future. It will also stop anyone from using fracking to open up oil supplies that may still be undiscovered within the county, she said.

“There’s always a chance someone will find more potential (oil) and frack to get it,” she said.