

Carson backs away from its ban on fracking

Sandy Mazza, Daily Breeze, 6-23-16

Just as a federal judge revoked President Barack Obama's partial prohibition on fracking this week, Carson leaders rescinded the ban they introduced three months ago on the aggressive well-stimulation method.

Instead, the industrial suburb made an agreement with local oil and gas drillers not to use hydraulic fracturing — better known as fracking — or other intense well-drilling technologies such as acidizing used to get at hard-to-reach deposits. These methods, used in conjunction with horizontally drilled wells, are credited with the U.S. energy boom that began in 2010.

The City Council voted 4-1 on Tuesday night to pull the ban it introduced in March after more than two years of public debate on the issue. Councilwoman Lula Davis-Holmes, a vocal opponent of the practice, voted against the decision.

“The city reached settlement agreements with the oil operators in Carson that have protections that prevent fracking,” City Manager Ken Farfsing said. “The city has major concerns that the fracking ban was preempted by state law and, if adopted by the city, would be overturned by the courts.”

The Obama administration's 2015 ban on fracking on federal and American Indian property was also overturned Tuesday by U.S. District Judge Scott Skavdahl, who argued that Congress needed to sign off on the regulation for it to be legal.

In exchange for not making fracking illegal, local petroleum companies agreed not to sue Carson over its recent adoption of some of the most stringent regulations on oil and gas drilling in the state. The city's new Oil and Gas Code requires petroleum producers to be at least 750 feet away from businesses and residences, among other restrictions.

Petroleum companies have said for years that Los Angeles County's geology makes it an unlikely fracking candidate. But dozens of Carson residents have steadfastly protested the practice since 2011, when an oil company sought city permission to drill 200 new wells and use fracking.

Californians for Energy Independence praised Carson's decision to step away from an outright ban. Thus far, Beverly Hills is the only city in Los Angeles County to adopt a prohibition on fracking, though many cities — including Los Angeles — have considered doing so.

“We are pleased that the Carson City Council is not adopting a needless ban on the safe and highly regulated practice of hydraulic fracturing,” the coalition of petroleum industry representatives wrote in an e-mail. “Numerous independent studies have proven the practice to be safe to both the public and the environment, and California imposes the toughest-in-the-nation standards on hydraulic fracturing.”

Fracking was a largely unregulated minor concern in the petroleum industry until it bloomed into a major producing method in recent years. Regulators and scientists have since found that little is known about its health and environmental implications.

The environmental impacts of hundreds of chemicals used in fracking have yet to be studied, and oil industry data and record-keeping is shoddy, researchers said in federal and state reports. Ongoing research seeks to determine whether fracking is contributing to groundwater contamination, and what damage its wastewater discharges into the ocean are causing, among other things.

Meanwhile, Carson City Attorney Sunny Soltani said the city is well-protected from fracking, despite dropping its ban.

“If operators frack or use well-stimulation without the city’s consent, the city can shut down their operations,” Soltani said. “The agreements are very strong. City Council decided it is protecting its residents with the settlement agreements and there is no need to fight the statewide battle on taxpayer dollars.”