

# Famous scientists ask Interior to keep Calif. fracking ban

**Nathanial Gronewold, Environment & Energy Publishing, 3-23-16**

Prominent scientists and ocean conservationists today called on the Interior Department to keep in place the moratorium on fracking and other well stimulation techniques offshore from California until more scientific data is in.

A letter signed by more than 30 scientists was delivered this morning to the heads of the two main federal offshore drilling regulatory agencies, the Bureau of Ocean Energy Management and the Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement (BSEE), urging them to continue the temporary ban until an environmental impact statement is complete. The oil and gas activities targeted in the action include hydraulic fracturing, acidizing and "other well stimulation techniques off the California coast."

Signatories include prominent names in natural sciences such as author Carl Safina, oceanographer Sylvia Earle, climatologist Michael Mann and many more.

The group contends that existing studies show offshore well stimulation may pose a risk to marine environments and nearby communities. Offshore well stimulation actions can occur deep beneath the ocean bottom and are a routine part of oil and gas extraction in the Gulf of Mexico.

Citing "significant data gaps," the group of scientists asks the agencies to hold off on lifting the moratorium for California until studies can take place. An initial assessment issued last month is just the first step, it argues.

"The draft environmental assessment, issued in February, offers a preliminary analysis of the impacts, including an acknowledgement of the many data gaps and uncertainties," the letter says. "The draft assessment highlights a clear need for a full evaluation of the impacts of offshore well stimulation on California's coastal ecosystem."

The criticism comes in response to a new draft environmental assessment Interior performed as part of a legal settlement with two environmental groups who challenged offshore fracking.

The current offshore well stimulation halt is just the latest regulatory headwind facing offshore drilling in the United States. Already battered by the oil price collapse, operators of offshore rigs are facing new challenges in the form of safety and environmental regulations.

New proposed rules governing blowout preventers are being reviewed by the White House Office of Management and Budget. BSEE chief Brian Salerno said in an earlier interview in Houston that industry has opportunities to deliver further input before the rules are finalized.

"OMB is holding what's called listening sessions so the industry has the opportunity to come in and comment on the rule, and OMB gets that directly," Salerno said. "Industry is aware of where it sits, and I believe there are about 15 listening sessions which are predominantly industry groups, either individual companies or trade associations, that are going and meeting with OMB to discuss the rule."

The Obama administration has also recently announced it is rescinding plans to offer offshore acreage in the Atlantic for lease to the oil industry. The administration now wants to tighten air quality regulations on offshore activities.

More than 127 environmental and social justice groups also urged the administration to keep the Pacific off limits to fracking and acidizing. They say Interior's assessment fails to fully account for the risks.

"The Bureaus' flawed draft assessment acknowledges the risks of offshore fracking, but then largely ignores them," the groups said in a [letter](#). "In so doing, the Bureaus failed to fully disclose the environmental impacts of their plan to allow oil companies to resume offshore fracking and other controversial drilling techniques. Moreover, the draft assessment concedes that there are unknown impacts, undisclosed chemicals, and data gaps; but illogically concludes that offshore fracking has no significant environmental impacts."

The Sierra Club, WildEarth Guardians, the Center for Biological Diversity and a range of other national and local groups signed on to the letter. CBD was one of two environmental groups involved in the legal settlement that prompted Interior to take a closer look at the impacts.