

Golden-Krasner: Halt water giveaway to oil companies

Maya Golden-Krasner, Ventura County Star, 9-10-16

Has Gov. Jerry Brown finally realized how dangerous the oil industry is to California? It sure seemed that way after the titanic legislative battle over SB 32, a measure extending the state's greenhouse gas reduction targets.

Oil lobbyists threw everything they had at the climate bill — and lost. After the vote, Gov. Brown praised state lawmakers for “rejecting the brazen deception of the oil lobby and their Trump-inspired allies who deny science and fight every reasonable effort to curb global warming.”

Yet even during oil companies’ blistering attacks on this climate initiative, Gov. Brown’s own regulators were moving quietly forward with a disturbing plan to allow the industry to turn dozens of California’s underground water sources — including an aquifer near Oxnard — into permanent disposal sites for oil waste fluid.

The state’s Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources has already released a handful of proposed “aquifer exemption applications” that aim to exempt underground water in Kern and San Luis Obispo counties from water-protection laws.

And earlier this summer, the oil agency released a draft plan to support up to 60 applications from oil companies asking the EPA to exempt underground water in Monterey, Ventura and other counties across California from the Safe Drinking Water Act.

If the EPA approves these applications, the oil industry would be allowed to drill injection wells and dump waste fluid into these underground water sources.

There’s one obvious way these aquifer exemptions will hurt California. Our drought-challenged state needs our water. We can’t afford to turn aquifers into trash dumps for oil waste, which commonly contains cancer-causing benzene.

But there’s another dangerous effect Gov. Brown should consider. This gigantic water giveaway will empower oil companies to expand operations, causing more planet-warming pollution and increasing this dirty industry’s troubling power over our state.

For a vivid illustration of the harm these exemptions will enable, look at San Luis Obispo County. Earlier this year, state oil officials submitted an exemption application to the EPA for an aquifer in the Arroyo Grande area north of Pismo Beach.

People living nearby were appalled. They see oil industry pollution as a huge threat, since at least 100 wells for drinking water and crop irrigation sit within a mile of this aquifer.

But nearby residents won’t be the only ones hurt. If EPA officials approve this aquifer exemption, oil giant Freeport-McMoRan plans to drill hundreds of new wells in the Arroyo Grande oil field, which produces some of the dirtiest, most carbon-intensive oil in California.

Allowing a massive expansion of this dirty oil field makes absolutely zero sense in our state, which is determined to be a leader in the fight against global warming. And the more oil companies drill, the more money they have to spill in Sacramento to undermine climate legislation.

Gov. Brown has toured the world touting California's leadership on global warming, even as he's quietly supported fracking and other oil industry efforts aimed at expanding operations in our state.

The governor must stop trying to have it both ways. Climate leaders don't help oil companies drill more wells while scientists warn us that most fossil fuels must stay in the ground. And they certainly don't give away California's underground water to a dirty industry that fights against every effort to protect our state from climate catastrophe.

Maya Golden-Krasner is an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity.