

Trump opening California public land to fracking, gas leases. Is it 'reckless'?

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The Trump administration has finalized its plans to open hundreds of thousands of acres of federal land in Central California to oil and gas leasing, paving the way for more fracking to soon begin in the state.

The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) approved the oil and gas exploration plan "based on the administration's goal of strengthening [energy independence](#) and the BLM support of an all-of-the-above energy plan that includes oil and gas underlying America's public lands," it said in its record of decision released Friday.

The agency received more than 400 objections of its proposed leasing plan over a 30-day protest period, according to its final report. BLM officials ruled that none of them was valid.

According to the decision, oil and gas drilling can move forward on more than 700,000 acres of public land and mineral estate in Alameda, Contra Costa, Fresno, Merced, Monterey, San Benito, San Joaquin, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Santa Cruz and Stanislaus Counties.

The agency's plan could result in up to 37 new oil and gas wells drilling on new land leases over the next 20 years, primarily in Fresno, Monterey and San Benito counties. BLM estimates that the oil and gas industry directly supports 3,000 jobs and \$623 million in tax revenue within those counties.

BLM, which is a division of the Department of Interior, is also considering a proposal to conduct new oil and gas development on 1.6 million acres of public land in Southern California. The planning area, which covers Fresno, Kern, Kings, Madera, San Luis Obispo, Santa Barbara, Tulare and Ventura counties, includes about 400,000 acres of public land and 1.2 million acres of federal mineral estate, according to the report.

BLM has not yet finalized that proposal.

While California remains one of the largest oil producing states in the nation, production has steadily declined over the last three decades.

Clare Lakewood, a senior attorney at the environmental group Center for Biological Diversity, called the decision on the Central California leasing proposal "reckless."

"Turning over these spectacular wild places to dirty drilling and fracking will sicken Californians, harm endangered species and fuel climate chaos. We'll fight tooth and nail to make sure it doesn't happen," Lakewood said in a statement from the group.

The Center for Biological Diversity was behind the lawsuit that effectively halted BLM oil and gas leasing in California since 2013. A U.S. District Court ruled that BLM failed to consider the environmental impacts of fracking when evaluating drilling leases, forcing the federal government to restart the planning process.

In its new oil and gas leasing plans for California, BLM says it has sufficiently factored in those environmental considerations.

Critics, however, argue the agency has consistently ignored relevant science. In comments reacting to the oil and gas leasing proposal for federal land in Southern California, California Attorney General Xavier Becerra suggested that BLM's environmental assessment "disregards important impacts to the communities, relies on incorrect assumptions, ignores alternative options, and is otherwise unlawful."

Becerra also filed a lawsuit in 2018 challenging BLM's decision to repeal Obama-era regulations to require more environmental scrutiny of fracking on federal and tribal land. That case is still pending

The agency's next step is to gather feedback from the energy companies on which parcels of land they are interested in leasing and then schedule a lease auction.

The plan could still face legal challenges. The court decision in California's lawsuit against the agency's fracking rule rollback could constrain further energy leasing, as well.

State lawmakers, meanwhile, are hoping to deter companies from drilling on federal land. The California Legislature passed a bill last month that would prohibit the construction of new oil and gas infrastructure on state land if it is being built to support production of oil and natural gas upon protected federal lands. The bill is now on Gov. Gavin Newsom's desk.

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