

Los Angeles: Hollywood, palm trees and urban oil fields

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Pumpjacks in an oil well are seen on September 25, 2019 near Hilltop Park overlooking the city of Signal Hill, California, where oil has been pumped since the 1920s

For most outsiders, Los Angeles is all about Hollywood, palm trees and sunny skies.

But the huge metropolis that is home to nearly four million people is also the largest urban oil field in the country.

Hundreds of active oil wells sit in densely populated and mostly low-income neighborhoods of the county, butting up against schools, homes, parks, shopping malls or cemeteries.

Though the drill sites have been part of the landscape for decades and are an integral part of the city's history, they have increasingly become unwelcome neighbors for residents and [environmental activists](#) who say they pose a public health risk and should be phased out in [urban areas](#).

"We don't need to be doing this anymore," said Martha Dina Arguello, director of the Los Angeles chapter of the non-profit Physicians for Social Responsibility and co-chair of STAND-L.A. (Stand Together Against Neighborhood Drilling), a coalition of community-based groups working to stamp out urban oil drilling.

Arguello spoke to AFP as she stood in front of a drilling site in a residential neighborhood northwest of downtown Los Angeles and adjacent to three schools and a park.

"How much profit is it worth to expose all of the people here to the risk of a catastrophic accident?" said Arguello, pointing to 10 pumpjacks hidden behind a fence and bobbing up and down like prehistoric birds as they sucked up oil.

"These oil sites shouldn't be in our communities," she added. "They are a source of air pollution ... and they're part of the climate crisis."



Heather Hartmann pushes her daughter Everly, age 2, in a stroller past a pumpjack in an oil well on October 21, 2019 in Signal Hill, which was once called "Porcupine Hill" because of the number of oil derricks that blanketed the area

Buffer zone

The pushback against urban oil has prompted several local lawmakers and environmental advocates to call for a ban on new permits for oil drilling in the state and for a 2,500-foot (760-meter) buffer around all neighborhood oil drilling sites.

A meeting on the subject held at Los Angeles City Hall last month drew a standing-room crowd of concerned citizens but also dozens of industry

workers worried about losing their livelihood.

The issue has even been championed by Swedish climate activist Greta Thunberg, who joined fellow teenagers in Los Angeles this month to protest oil drilling in the state.

Amalia Sanchez, one of the people who spoke at the City Hall meeting, said residents in her working-class neighborhood of Wilmington, south of downtown Los Angeles, often complain of asthma and headaches as well as a nauseating smell from nearby oilfields.

"People question why I still live here but where else can I go? I don't have money to pay more rent," said the 62-year-old who has asthma and was recently diagnosed with a lung tumor. "Nobody cares about us because we are poor."

Further north, in a neighborhood close to the University of Southern California (USC), Anna Parks worries about the three oil-drilling sites near her home and the impact on her children's health.

"One of the sites has been in the news a lot for children having nosebleeds, breathing problems and headaches related to the fumes coming from the operation," Parks, a student adviser at USC and part of a community group that has sought to raise awareness on the issue, told AFP on a recent tour of her neighborhood.

She said that while she realizes community groups are no match for the powerful oil lobby, there was no reason residents of poorer neighborhoods of LA should not be given protections long afforded to wealthier communities in the county.

"I thought Los Angeles was a movie town, but it's really an oil town," said Parks, who grew up in Seattle, Washington, and moved to California

about 20 years ago. "My (three) kids' favorite park when they were little was located 350 yards from a drill site... and they have been breathing toxins related to oil drilling their entire lives."



People make their way into Curley's Cafe in Signal Hill, which sits in the shadow of a pumpjack

Nodding donkeys

Nowhere is LA's legacy of oil production more apparent than in Signal Hill, located about 22 miles south of downtown Los Angeles and once referred to as "Porcupine Hill" because of the number of oil derricks that blanketed the area.

Today, dozens of pumpjacks—also known as nodding donkeys—still operate in the tiny enclave, many of them sitting among homes and apartment complexes.

But while several residents interviewed said the machines should be removed, especially given the Golden State's commitment to a low carbon future, many others took issue with the impact such a move would have on the local economy and the thousands employed by the oil industry.

They also point out that oil production across the state has steadily dropped since the 1980s, with LA county producing some 12 million barrels of oil in 2018 as opposed to nearly 26 million in 2008.

"If we shut down all these facilities, where will all the workers go?" said an oil field worker sitting at Curley's Cafe, which has a pumpjack operating in the parking lot. "We need to keep people employed and keep the [tax revenues](#)."

Skepticism also runs deep among those in the industry when it comes to warnings by environmentalists about the health hazards posed by urban oil drilling and the 2,500-foot setback buffer proposed.

"There's no scientific evidence that an arbitrary setback would significantly improve the toughest-on-the-planet regulations Los Angeles producers already follow," said Rock Zierman, CEO of the California Independent Petroleum Association. "An arbitrary setback amounts to a de facto production ban in Los Angeles.

"This would mean thousands of workers would lose good-paying careers, the city would lose tax revenues to solve priorities like homelessness, and it would mean more imported oil from countries who do not honor environmental protections or human rights."

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