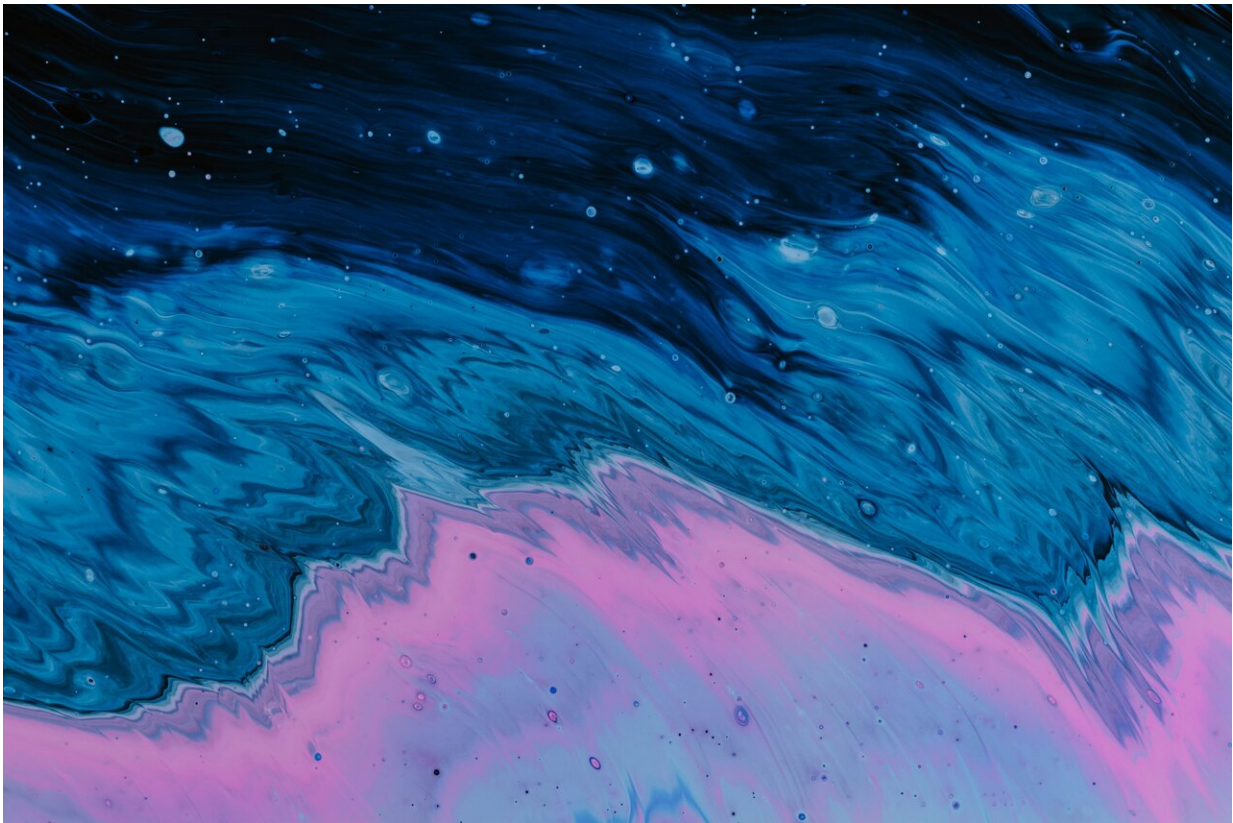


California lawmakers call for changes after Orange County oil spill

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Weeks after a massive oil spill marred the Orange County coast with significant environmental and economic damage, state lawmakers met in Sacramento on Thursday to demand that those responsible "be held

accountable," with one legislator calling for an end to offshore drilling in California.

At an oversight hearing by the state Senate's Natural Resources and Water Committee, legislators acknowledged that ending offshore drilling would be an extremely difficult task—the majority of oil rigs off California's coastline are in federally regulated waters. And any effort to rescind leases in state waters for drilling, pipelines and other oil infrastructure could face swift legal challenges and potentially cost taxpayers millions, if not billions, of dollars.

Still, lawmakers and state officials who testified Thursday agreed that the threats to wildlife and California's cherished beaches will remain as long as oil is extracted offshore.

"Is offshore drilling worth it? The risks that seem omnipresent jeopardize a coastal economy here in California that is worth approximately \$44 billion a year," said Sen. Dave Min (D-Irvine).

Min noted that offshore oil production in both federal and state waters in California accounts for less than 0.3% of annual production in the United States.

"That's not even a drop in the bucket and yet we continually face this threat of oil spills," he said.

The [spill](#) off Huntington Beach dumped an estimated 25,000 gallons into the ocean and investigators suspect it was caused by a cargo ship anchor snagging a 17-mile-long pipeline that runs from an oil platform to the Port of Long Beach.

Thursday's hearing shed little new light on the investigation into the cause of the spill, which occurred 4.5 miles offshore in federal waters.

No additional details surfaced about the timing and effectiveness of the response to the spill by the pipeline operator or U.S. Coast Guard, which came into question in the days after the incident.

Chuck Bonham, director of the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, provided an overview of the state's response to the spill. On Sunday, Oct. 3, two days after officials received reports of a potential spill, Bonham said he and other [state officials](#) flew over the water to see for themselves the extent of the crisis they faced.

"[What] I viewed from the air that morning terrified me, confirmed we were in the middle of a significant event. We should assume worst case," Bonham said.

Bonham said that during the first week of the response, there were close to 1,500 people deployed to clean up beaches and sensitive environmental sites, contain the oil floating off the coast and treat wildlife soaked by spilled oil. When asked about the investigation into the cause of the spill, Bonham deferred to federal authorities leading the inquiry.

"It is connected to that evidentiary and investigatory dynamic and I just can't comment," he told lawmakers.

Sen. Brian Jones (R-Santee) called for a thorough investigation into the spill and how it could have been prevented, but he cautioned members not to jump to conclusions about who was to blame.

"While surely the oil company has some responsibility in the matter, I think it's important for us not to push all the blame onto the industry before knowing all the facts," Jones said.

The spill forced beach closures and deposited gobs of crude oil along the

coast in Newport Beach, Laguna Beach and Huntington Beach, killing fish and birds and threatening sensitive wetlands. The U.S. Small Business Administration has approved federal disaster assistance for businesses affected by the spill.

At a news conference at Bolsa Chica State Beach days afterward, Gov. Gavin Newsom said it was "time once and for all to disabuse ourselves that [oil drilling] has to be part of our future." Min has also vowed to introduce legislation to end drilling and oil production off the California coast.

An Amplify Energy subsidiary, Beta Operating Co., operates the oil rigs off the Orange County coast and the San Pedro Bay Pipeline is responsible for the pipeline that burst. Though the spill occurred in federal waters, the pipeline is one of many granted a long-term lease by the State Lands Commission to pass through state waters, which extend three nautical miles from shore.

Representatives from Amplify were invited to testify at Thursday's hearing but declined, said committee chairman Sen. Henry Stern (D-Los Angeles).

In California, both Democratic and Republican governors and the state lands and coastal commissions have successfully fended off numerous efforts to expand offshore drilling in federal waters.

In the 1980s, when the administration of then-President Reagan sought to open much of the nation's outer continental shelves, 24 California cities and counties passed local laws banning new infrastructure that would support offshore drilling. Seventeen of them were sued by oil companies, but the ordinances all still exist in some form.

In 1994, the state Legislature passed the California Coastal Sanctuary

Act, which prohibits new leasing in state waters.

When the Trump administration pushed to open federal waters to drilling on an unprecedented scale, California passed laws blocking new oil and gas pipelines and other infrastructure from being built on state lands.

The Orange County spill was just the latest blow to California oil and gas industry production, which has been on the decline since the mid-1980s.

In April, Newsom took action to ban new permits for hydraulic fracturing starting in 2024, halting the controversial oil extraction method that's been targeted by environmental activists for years.

The governor also called on the California Air Resources Board to determine how to end all oil extraction in the state by 2045. The governor's office said that plan would coincide with California's effort to achieve economy-wide carbon neutrality by 2045, including Newsom's call to ban the sale of new gas-powered vehicles in the state by 2035.

And last week, the Newsom administration took the first step toward banning new oil and gas wells within 3,200 feet of homes, schools and healthcare facilities. Newsom offered a blunt assessment about the future of California's billion-dollar oil and gas industry when he announced the measure.

"We don't see oil in our future," he said.

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