

Years after governor's order, California is finally set to ban oil and gas fracking

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Nearly three years after Gov. Gavin Newsom directed it, California's oil and gas industry regulator kickstarted a process to outright ban hydraulic fracturing, the fossil fuel extraction method known as 'fracking.'

Fracking permits have not been issued in the state since 2021, but environmentalists celebrated the move as a win in the fight against [climate change](#). Oil industry groups called it yet another example of regulatory overreach and argued it could lead to higher oil prices.

Late last week, the Geologic Energy Management Division (CalGEM) said in a draft rule that it will officially cease to approve [hydraulic fracturing](#) permits on California oil and gas wells.

"This regulatory change will improve the Department's Geologic Energy Management Division's ability to prevent damage to life, health, property, and natural resources... including the mitigation and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions," said Jacob Roper, a spokesperson for the Department of Conservation.

Hydraulic fracturing involves injecting a high-pressure mixture of water, sand and chemicals underground to fracture subterranean layers of rock and release oil and gas. The practice is more common in larger oil gas producing states such as Texas and Pennsylvania.

As the practice exploded in the mid-2000s, research gave fracking a reputation for pollution and public health dangers. Fracking not only is water intensive, it releases potent greenhouse gases such as methane and benzene and can contaminate groundwater basins with chemical additives.

Even in earlier days of oil and gas extraction in California, fracking was not widespread. Roughly 13% of California oil and gas wells have been fracked at least once. Overall, permitted fracking operations accounted for just 2% of statewide oil production in 2021.

CalGem estimated that the new ban, which it expects to be approved by the end of 2024, would have moderate impact on oil production. The

agency said the rule would lead to \$190 million in costs incurred by oil and gas operators and cut production by 4%.

California's oil production industry has been on the decline since the 1980s, but that doesn't mean it's going down without a fight. Last year Chevron and the Western States Petroleum Association collectively spent more than \$18 million on lobbying in Sacramento.

Catherine Reheis-Boyd, president and CEO of WSPA, said CalGEM had already instituted a de-facto ban on fracking but that this rule would exceed the limit of the agency's [regulatory authority](#) and overlooks "decades of safe operations."

"This decision is another misplaced political assault on production and [energy supplies](#) by the Newsom administration," she said. "These types of policies are devastating to our state's energy supplies, which are rapidly shrinking under the Newsom administration, and will likely lead to even higher energy costs for California consumers."

Three years ago, after Newsom directed CalGEM to cease issuing fracking permits and set a 2024 deadline to legally end the practice, the state denied a string of at least 100 fracking permit applications. Several oil companies filed suit, claiming the agency could not reject permits without a formal ban.

Now, after three years of quiet on the issue from the agency, this new effort could put those lawsuits to bed, said Hollin Kretzmann, an attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity's Climate Law Institute.

"Symbolically, it means California is moving in the right direction. A ban on fracking is a simple no brainer," he said. "Californians have wanted to end fracking for years, and hopefully this rule is an indication that they're getting serious on the rest of the fossil fuel industry."

If CalGEM was serious about addressing the climate crisis, Kretzmann said, it could use its authority to put a new oil well setback restriction into regulation. California passed a restriction 2022 but that law has been suspended pending a referendum vote in 2024.

CalGEM said it will hold a virtual public hearing on the fracking rule on Tuesday, March 26 ahead of the public comment deadline.

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