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CONTACT

Severn Williams, 510-336-9566

Public Good PR

sev@publicgoodpr.com

Local, State and National Groups Launch Campaign to Stop Massive Oil and Gas Drilling Expansion in California's Central Valley

Joint letter urges Kern County to protect farmworkers and vulnerable communities from increased oil and gas pollution

BAKERSFIELD, Calif. – A coalition of social and environmental justice groups and conservation nonprofits has launched a campaign to fight an ordinance that would fast-track the permitting of more than 67,000 new toxic oil and gas wells. The ordinance would greenlight a near doubling of the number of oil and gas wells in Kern County for the coming decades, without adequate environmental review or mitigation to protect vulnerable community members from air and water pollution. There are more than 78,000 operating oil and gas wells in Kern County already, accounting for [approximately 80 percent](#) of oil and gas production in California. Kern County is located in California's Central Valley, an area that produces one fourth of the nation's food.

More than 100 groups have issued a [joint letter](#) to the Kern County Board of Supervisors and Planning Commission, urging officials to reject the ordinance. The campaign is also soliciting signatures on [a petition to Governor Newsom and the Board of Supervisors](#). The petition urges the governor to stop business as usual when it comes to oil and gas development, and instead, to prioritize community health and well-being and a sustainable climate.

Kern County's 2015 effort to allow this extensive expansion of fossil fuel extraction was struck down by the Fifth District Court of Appeal earlier this year. Between December 2015 and when the ordinance was struck down, Kern County issued [more than 9,000](#) oil and gas drilling permits. The Court found that the County failed to adequately disclose or mitigate the significant harms this ordinance would cause to the county's water, air and public health. Despite these failures, the County released a new [draft environmental impact report](#) just months later that does little to address these and other significant, harmful impacts.

Kern County residents have expressed frustration that there has been little to no opportunity for them to learn the true costs of or comment on this proposed ordinance. The County has refused to extend the public comment period for the new EIR and refused to take verbal comments in the two short meetings it has held virtually. The County also has failed to provide notices and environmental review documents in Spanish, despite the

fact that Latino community members disproportionately live in close proximity to oil and gas operations. **On October 9, the County issued a notice (in English only) stating that it will release another draft EIR by November 6.**

“This sham of a public process is particularly unacceptable when considering local low-income communities are dealing with life-threatening crises including the COVID-19 pandemic and wildfires surrounding the county,” said Estela Escoto, President of the Committee for a Better Arvin. “The process is designed to limit the voices of the people most affected. Our joint letter is one way to raise the voices of the people who would be most affected by this ordinance.”

“This ordinance would be a disaster for public health in Kern County, particularly for low-income communities of color that live next to oil wells and are already harmed daily by fossil fuel pollution,” said Chelsea Tu, Senior Attorney at the Center on Race, Poverty and the Environment. “Yet it is clear that the County does not want to hear from its residents and is simply trying to steamroll this ordinance in the next two months so that it can greenlight oil and gas drilling for the next twenty years.”

The southern Central Valley has [some of the worst air pollution in the nation, with oil and gas production](#) a leading cause. The oil and gas extraction process releases a toxic soup of chemicals and particle pollution into the air. Numerous studies show a direct link between oil and gas production and a wide range of adverse health impacts. Nevertheless, [2.1 million Californians live within a mile](#) of active oil and gas wells. In Kern County, more than [71,000 people](#) live within 2,500 feet of oil and gas wells; [43% of these people are Hispanic](#). Public health experts have long understood that communities of color suffer the brunt of [air](#) and other types of [pollution](#), both in rates of exposure and in serious health impacts.

In addition, recent studies in [Italy, the Netherlands](#), and the [U.S.](#) have shown a correlation between exposure to air pollution and increased risk of contracting, and of dying from, COVID-19. Disturbingly, people of color are contracting and dying from COVID-19 in disproportionate numbers.

“In the face of all of these burdens, the last thing the people of Kern County need is yet more air and water pollution from fossil fuel development,” said Cesar Aguirre, Kern resident and community organizer for the Central California Environmental Justice Network (CCEJN). “Residents like Joana from Arvin are already dealing with the long term effects. She was exposed to a dangerous gas leak underneath her sister's home in 2014. Doctors discovered a cancer developing in her lungs at her first check up after recovering from COVID-19. More has to be done to protect Kern residents.”

“California’s heatwaves and fires have shown we can’t afford to drill any more wells in the state, let alone another 67,000 or more,” said Hollin Kretzmann, an attorney for the Center for Biological Diversity. “Our state and local officials should be leading a just transition, starting with a halt to new well permits, a health and safety buffer, and a rapid phase out that ramps up plugging dangerous oil and gas wells across the state.”

“This ordinance would make it that much harder to transition our economy away from fossil fuels to a cleaner, more sustainable future,” explained Monica Embrey at the Sierra Club. “We must take a strong stand now to stop this unfettered expansion of oil and gas production.”

“Kern County is fiddling while California burns,” said Ann Alexander, a senior attorney at NRDC (Natural Resources Defense Council). “Their plan for years has been to undercut California law requiring careful analysis of environmental impacts, so they can make things easier for oil drillers. And now, even after a drubbing by the court and the state in flames due to climate change, they remain unrepentant. They’re still trying to railroad through their plan while the public suffers.”

People can sign the petition at <https://crpe-ej.org/StopKernOilOrdinance>.

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