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Kern County Sued Over Fast-tracking of Tens of Thousands of New Oil Wells

BAKERSFIELD, *Calif.*— Community and environmental groups filed a [lawsuit](#) Wednesday challenging Kern County's adoption of an ordinance that would fast-track permitting for oil and gas projects and eliminate future environmental reviews and public participation.

The ordinance adopted Monday by the Kern County Board of Supervisors approved a single environmental impact report to serve as an environmental review for more than 40,000 new oil and gas projects over the coming decades.

"This ordinance is a disaster for public health in Kern County, particularly for low-income communities and Black, Indigenous, Latinx and other 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, which represents the Committee for a Better Arvin, Committee for a Better Shafter, and Comité Progreso de Lamont in the lawsuit. "Kern communities are bringing this lawsuit in order to protect their families because the county has failed to do so."

This week's adoption comes a year after a California appeals court struck down a nearly identical ordinance, which the oil industry spent more than \$10 million to develop. The court found that Kern County failed to adequately disclose or mitigate significant health and environmental harms from anticipated projects.

The county's new environmental impact report has few meaningful changes. It still fails to require adequate environmental review and mitigation and doesn't protect communities from toxic pollution generated by oil and gas extraction.

“We’re suing to protect community members from this blatant disregard of the need for a thorough and honest environmental review,” said Ann Alexander, a senior attorney at Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC). “Kern County deserves better than a rubberstamped fossil fuel nightmare for years to come.”

Kern County accounts for 80% of all oil and gas production in California and has some of the [most polluted air](#) in the country. Numerous scientific studies show a direct link between oil and gas pollution and a wide range of serious health harms, including asthma, cancer, high-risk pregnancies and preterm births. A recent Harvard study found [34,000 premature deaths](#) in California in a single year could be attributed to fossil fuel emissions.

“Kern County’s oil production is some of the dirtiest and most damaging in the world for people’s health and our climate,” said Hollin Kretzmann, an attorney at the Center for Biological Diversity’s Climate Law Institute. “Adding tens of thousands of wells will trigger more frequent and severe droughts, heatwaves and wildfires and cause more illness and death. Kern County’s fast-track plan is an appalling violation of our state’s bedrock environmental protection and community right-to-know law.”

Low-income communities and Black, Indigenous, Latinx and other communities of color already suffer pollution-related exposure and serious health problems at disproportionate levels, in Kern County and across the nation. Of the Californians who live within a mile of oil and gas wells and also live within areas identified by CalEPA as most burdened by environmental pollution in general, nearly 92% are people of color.

“County leaders have turned their back on Kern, and we’re filing this lawsuit to stand up for our communities, particularly for low-income communities and communities of color who’ve been disproportionately impacted by air pollution for years,” said Elly Benson, a senior attorney at the Sierra Club. “It’s past time to focus on putting communities and climate first to build a safe, healthy future for Kern residents for generations to come.”

The lawsuit was filed in Kern County Superior Court by Committee for a Better Arvin, Committee for a Better Shafter, Comité Progreso de Lamont, NRDC, Sierra Club and the Center.

Earthjustice and Center on Race, Poverty, and the Environment are providing legal representation alongside NRDC and the Center.

The Center for Biological Diversity is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 1.7 million members and online activists dedicated to the protection of endangered species and wild places.