

Coastal Commission should halt offshore fracking

BY ANDREW CHRISTIE

February 10, 2014

When the California Coastal Commission meets in Pismo Beach on Wednesday, the first day of a two-day meeting, it will hear a staff report on the practice of hydraulic fracturing — aka fracking — by oil companies off the coast of California.

Fracking is the use of a pressurized cocktail consisting of millions of gallons of water and toxic chemicals to extract oil or gas from fractured shale formations. A growing body of evidence has linked it to the contamination of drinking water, air pollution and earthquakes.

It's been going on for years off our coast, a fact that was largely unknown until last summer. In line with the lack of transparency that has been the industry's hallmark, when the folks who brought us the Santa Barbara Channel oil spill and the Deepwater Horizon disaster decided to start fracking from offshore rigs, they didn't tell anybody.

On Wednesday, the Coastal Commission needs to hear from everyone that the Commission must order a halt to the practice.

When the Bureau of Land Management leased 2,700 acres of land in Monterey and Fresno counties to oil and gas drillers in 2011 without taking into account the environmental impacts of fracking, Monterey County objected. "America's salad bowl" had an issue with the water pollution that comes with fracking and the impacts it would have on both the price and quality of food.

The Sierra Club and Center for Biological Diversity sued, and last April a federal judge agreed with us that the BLM was wrong to argue that oil and gas production via fracking presented environmental impacts no different from the impacts of conventional drilling. Attorney Brendan Cummings, representing the plaintiffs, noted that the court's ruling recognized that "fracking poses new, unique risks to California's air, water and wildlife that government agencies can't ignore."

Off our coast, the oil companies have gone the BLM one better: Government agencies didn't even have the option of choosing to ignore those risks because, until last year, those agencies didn't know fracking was happening. Now we know.

As Sierra Club President Allison Chin put it in 2012, "We can't even count on the federal government to keep us safe. The out-of control rush to drill has put oil and gas industry profits ahead of our health, our families, our property, our communities and our futures. Together, though, we can change that. No industry, no matter how wealthy or powerful, can withstand the righteous passion of the American people."

That righteous passion needs to fill the hearing room at the Cliffs Resort in Pismo Beach on Wednesday. Until and unless it can be proven safe, fracking shouldn't be happening. A moratorium needs to be imposed statewide, and it needs to start right here, right now, right off our coast.

The "Hydraulic Fracturing Update" and public comment is Item 7a on Wednesday's agenda, and will likely be heard between 9 a.m. and noon.

Andrew Christie is director of the Santa Lucia Chapter of the Sierra Club.