

# Experts: Fracking has potential in Valley

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STOCKTON - Fracking, the practice of fracturing underground rock formations to tap previously unrecoverable troves of oil and natural gas, holds huge potential for the San Joaquin Valley, a panel of experts said Thursday.

But that potential may still be years in the future, as fracking has proved less effective in California's complex geology than it has in North Dakota and Texas, where it has created oil booms. And most development, in the short term, would likely remain near existing oil fields in the southern San Joaquin Valley and Southern California.

The San Joaquin County Hispanic Chamber of Commerce and University of the Pacific hosted a private luncheon Thursday to hear from experts in the oil industry, government and academia. Not invited were environmentalists and community activities who have sought a state moratorium on fracking.

Nate Monroe, who holds an endowed chair in political science at the University of California, Merced, said communities where fracking has created oil booms see growth in direct extraction activities and even bigger secondary growth in "everything from home building to car dealers to restaurants."

"Fracking has huge potential and is hugely beneficial to any region it comes into," Monroe said.

But the practice is also associated with reports of water well contamination, unexpected natural gas seepage and similar concerns in other states where it has been applied.

"It's been a highly controversial subject," said Jason Marshall, chief deputy director of the state Department of Conservation.

Those problems, however, have not been seen in California, where hydraulic fracturing and other types of oil-well stimulation techniques have been used since the 1950s and '60s.

"In California, we're ahead of the curve," Marshall said.

Not only have existing regulations and practices helped prevent the types of problems seen in other states, conservation officials are in the process of implementing even more stringent rules.

By next year, fracking plans would have to be evaluated and underground aquifers checked before development would occur. Neighbors would be alerted to activity near or under their properties. Groundwater would be monitored during fracking projects and all materials and chemicals used disclosed to the public after they are applied.

Tupper Hull, vice president of the Western States Petroleum Association, an industry group including major integrated oil companies, called on his audience to help support fracking as one way to supply the state and nation's enormous appetite for petroleum fuels.

"This technology has completely changed this country's energy future and the geopolitical posture of this

country," he said, noting that the oil boom has eased U.S. dependence on foreign imports.

"It changes everything for the country. It changes a lot for California," he said.

However, the use of hydraulic fracturing is not quite the boon it was recently thought to be.

The U.S. Energy Information Administration cut its estimate of recoverable oil from the Monterey shale, a formation that underlies much of the San Joaquin Valley and Southern California, to 600 million barrels from its earlier 13.7 billion barrel projection. That still a sizable pot in a state where current proven oil reserves stand at 2.7 billion barrels.

The state's jumbled geology, where underground formations have been folded and sliced by earthquakes and faults, provide lower yields to fracking than drillers might see in Texas or North Dakota.

But that doesn't mean that oil is lost, Hull said.

"I'm confident the smart folks in our industry are going to figure this out," he said.

For the immediate future, Hull said, most new production in the state would likely be near existing oil fields.

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