

Environmental group says oil and gas industry hurts air quality

The environmental group Earthworks has released a report that raises questions about possible adverse health effects from living near oil and gas production.

The 56-page report, "Californians At Risk: An Analysis of Health Threats from Oil and Gas Pollution in Two Communities," examined air quality around oil wells in Lost Hills in Kern County and Upper Ojai in Ventura County.

The Washington, D.C.-based environmental organization based its assessment on infrared camera imaging and air samples collected near production facilities, as well as data from health surveys.

The findings were that residents in both communities are being exposed to contaminants, and that long-term exposure could pose serious health risks.

The group conceded that the limited frequency and number of air samples provided just a snapshot of air emissions, not a general conclusion, but at the very least it was a "clear warning sign" demonstrating the need for further study and additional regulation until more is known.

"We can't say anything definitive, but we believe there is a correlation between the emissions we're detecting and the symptoms those communities are experiencing," said Jhon Arbelaez, an organizer for Earthworks and co-author of the report.

All of the Lost Hills samples revealed the presence of a variety of chemicals and compounds that are byproducts of hydrocarbon production, including some that are known to cause cancer and can affect nervous and reproductive systems.

Twenty-seven Lost Hills residents and 13 Upper Ojai residents who live near oil and gas operations agreed to answer questions for health surveys last year. Residents said they experienced adverse birth outcomes, throat and nasal irritation, sinus problems, eye burning, headaches, persistent cough, skin rashes and frequent nose bleeds.

Of Lost Hills respondents, 92.3 percent reported strange odors in their homes and community two to three times per week.

The Lost Hills oil field is northwest, west and southwest of the town at the intersection of Interstate 5 and California Highway 46, and winds from the northwest blow air from there directly into populated areas, according to the report.

The California Independent Petroleum Association dismissed the report as superficial. CEO Rock Zierman pointed to extensive, more comprehensive environmental impact reports in other areas that reached different conclusions, adding those were "based on real science."

"Kern County is a nonattainment area, not just because of oil and gas but because of automobiles and all kinds of other industries," Zierman added. "There's no way to know whether we are the source of whatever they found, if they found anything."

A nonattainment area is a federal Environmental Protection Agency designation for regions that do not meet a national ambient air quality standard.

Lucinda Wasson, a retired nurse and the former director of public health nursing for Kern County, worries that oil and gas operations are near some of the poorest communities in the state, and disadvantaged people are already at

higher risk for illness.

"I'm really concerned more about what we don't know than what we do know, and that we aren't researching it properly," she said.

Wasson likened the potential health risks to lead poisoning, noting that even after the scientific community reached a consensus that lead exposure was dangerous, use of lead continued for decades.

Earthworks is calling for more study of potential health risks and more regulation of the oil and gas industry.

California already is ahead of the East Coast on regulating the industry, said Jason Marshall, chief deputy director of the California Department of Conservation.

Years before other states, for instance, it mandated green completion, or putting gas and water pulled from the ground in tanks to settle naturally and skim later, as opposed to open air sumps that produced methane, a greenhouse gas.

Current regulations are doing a good job of protecting air quality, and the state responds quickly when there are problems, Marshall said. He pointed to the evacuation of about three dozen Arvin residents last year after a pipeline leak as evidence that energy producers are held accountable if they endanger public health.

This year, a new law -- Senate Bill 4 -- adds another layer of regulation. The law requires energy companies to obtain a permit before commencing well stimulation practices such as hydraulic fracking, and mandates public disclosure of the composition and disposition of well stimulation fluids.

There are 73 oil fields in Kern County.

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