

California authorizes oilfield dumping into drinking water

By ELLEN
KNICKMEYER



An injection well shut by the state is seen from across the street from a residential house, Thursday, Jan. 15, 2015, in Bakersfield, Calif. California regulators authorized oil companies more than 2,500 times to inject wastewater and other production-related fluids into federally protected aquifers potentially suitable for drinking and watering crops in the nation's agricultural center, state records show. JAE C. HONG — AP Photo

BAKERSFIELD, Calif. — Regulators in California, the country's third-largest oil-producing state, have authorized oil companies to inject production fluids and waste into what are now federally protected aquifers more than 2,500 times, risking contamination of underground water supplies that could be used for drinking water or irrigation, state records show.

While some of the permits go back decades, an Associated Press analysis found that nearly half of those injection wells — 46 percent — were permitted or began injection in the last four years under Gov. Jerry Brown, who has pushed state oil and gas regulators to speed up the permitting process. And it happened despite warnings from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency since 2011 that state regulators were failing to do enough to shield groundwater reserves from the threat of oilfield pollution.

In California, "we need a big course correction. We need to get the system back in compliance," said Jared Blumenfeld, regional administrator for the EPA. "Californians expect their water is not being polluted by oil producers ... This poses that very real danger."

The injections are convenient to oil companies because drilling brings up 13 gallons of wastewater for every gallon of petroleum. And one of the easiest disposal methods is simply to send that waste back underground.

The federal government is now demanding that state officials take immediate steps to find and deal with any contamination and end oil-industry operations in all aquifers set aside for families and farms.

Those water supplies are especially vital because California, the nation's most populous state and its agricultural leader, is now entering the fourth year of a historic drought.

State officials acknowledge that regulators erred, citing confusion about the boundaries of aquifers and oil fields or long-standing state misinterpretations of federal water-safety requirements. The vast majority of the permits were granted after the federal Safe Drinking Water Act in 1974.

For some of the permits, "we don't know how this got approved," said Jason Marshall, deputy director of the California Department of Conservation, which directly regulates the state's oil and gas industry.

In one case, regulators signed off on an application to inject wastewater into a federally protected aquifer, then realized their error and raced to the site.

"He had done injection for about 20 minutes," Marshall recalled. "We just said, 'Stop! You can't do that. Stop.'"

So far, state officials say they have no evidence of water contamination. But worries persist.

"The problem with just monitoring (for contaminants) is once you see it in the well, it's too late," said Timothy Parker, an independent Sacramento-based groundwater expert who has worked for the state Department of Water Resources and in the oil industry. "It's very difficult to clean up an aquifer once it's contaminated."

Over the summer, state oil and gas regulators sent the EPA lists of permits that allow oil companies to inject waste or production fluid into aquifers that were protected by the federal government. In December, the EPA gave the state until Friday to draft a plan for halting the practice and bringing the state into compliance with the 1974 Safe Drinking Water Act. The state has until 2017 to stop injections into any aquifer that has not been specifically designated for oil-industry waste disposal or drilling.

Officials are determined to both "manage the transition" back into compliance with federal law and to "maintain a robust oil industry," said Steve Bohlen, head of oil, gas and geothermal resources for the California Department of Conservation.

Of the 2,553 injection wells that the state has identified as risking contamination of protected aquifers, 1,172 were approved by the state or began injection in the last four years since Brown took office, according to state records. Marshall said Thursday that he believes the number in those years is actually lower than the records show, but the state does not know how much lower.

"We know our data has problems," he added.

Brown is a leading supporter of solar, wind and other renewable energy. But the Democratic governor has also supported tapping California's oil reserves.

In late 2011, Brown fired the state's top two oil-and-gas regulators after oil companies complained that their environmental reviews were slowing drilling permits. By early 2012, he was boasting of a double-digit jump in drilling-permit approvals as a result of those firings.

"The oil rigs are moving in Kern County. We want to use our resources ... our sun and all the other sources of power," Brown told a crowd in 2012 at the opening of a solar plant near Sacramento. "It's not going to be easy. There's going to be screw-ups. There's going to be bankruptcies. There'll be indictments, and there'll be deaths. But we're going to keep going."

Richard Stapler, spokesman for California's Natural Resources Agency, said neither the firings nor Brown's statements played a role in the hundreds of drilling permits granted for protected aquifers in his most recent term.

State officials said high oil prices earlier in the decade and a U.S. push for domestic oil production led to a surge in

mistakenly granted permits.

"What we really want to do right now is make sure we're not currently impacting public health and to put safeguards in place to make sure this does not happen again, and then we can determine precisely how it occurred in the past," Stapler said.

Most of the permits were granted for drilling sites in central California's Kern County, one of the country's main oil-producing counties. Many of the injection wells are in oilfields thick with rigs, tanks and disposal wells. But others sit among citrus groves, row crops and homes.

The AP found more than 170 permits involved aquifers met both federal and state standards for potential drinking water. That included at least 27 permits that authorized injections into aquifers with water state documents rated clean enough to tap for drinking without treatment.

At issue are so-called Class II injection wells, used to inject high-pressure steam or other material underground to force up oil and gas or to dispose of water — often briny — and other waste that comes up with the oil.

California oil-and-gas industry wells bring up 13 barrels of water for every barrel of oil, and oil companies say having a way to dispose of the waste is essential to the industry.

The injected wastewater is often cleaner than the water already underground. Other times, the injections can include high concentrations of salt or other chemicals.

Industry representatives say any threat to underground water sources is minimal.

"It's not a crisis, not a wide-scale problem. I think the fact the (state) identified the issue, took action and is now seeking to remedy, suggests the system works pretty well," said Tupper Hull of the Western States Petroleum Association.

In an orchard within sight of a disposal wells shut down by the state, fourth-generation farmer Mike Hopkins ran a hand over his face and turned to compose himself when asked about the threat of oil-field wastewater to aquifers farmers use.

Hopkins said damage from injections forced him to pull up his cherry trees in 2013, and he has filed a lawsuit blaming the oil companies with fracking wells and other installations that ring his orchards. The companies deny responsibility.

"We're farmers," Hopkins said. Pulling up the withered fruit trees "broke our hearts."

Associated Press Writer Serdar Tumgoren in San Francisco contributed to this report.

Copyright

© 2015 www.fresnobee.com and wire service sources. All Rights Reserved. <http://www.fresnobee.com>