

California senators focus on oil industry, drinking water

By ELLEN KNICKMEYER Associated Press

A hearing by state lawmakers Tuesday on problems in California's protection of drinking-water aquifers from the state oil and gas industry also is slated to focus attention on the way oil companies in the state use high-pressure steam to force up petroleum.

State oil and gas regulators have acknowledged "routinely" allowing oil and gas producers to inject steam underground at pressure so high that it cracks open underground rock formations, in violation of state and federal regulation, according to a state Senate report prepared for Tuesday's joint hearing by the Senate's environmental quality and natural resources and water committees.

The way that oil companies in California use steam injection to extract oil from aging oil fields came under scrutiny in June 2011, when a Chevron worker, Robert David Taylor, fell into a sinkhole of boiling fluid that opened suddenly in a Kern County oil field. Taylor boiled to death, state authorities found.

Environmental groups said Monday that forcing steam underground at pressure high enough to fracture rock formations risks opening up more sinkholes, as well as increasing the risk of oil-field fluids seeping into federally protected aquifers holding potential sources of drinking water.

"It's completely unsafe, completely illegal and completely unacceptable," said Kassie Siegel, senior counsel for the Center for Biological Diversity environmental group.

"Certainly I think it's an appropriate question" whether any high-pressure steam injection played a role in the Chevron worker's 2011 death, said Elizabeth Fenton, spokeswoman for state Sen. Fran Pavley, chairwoman for the Senate Natural Resources and Water Committee.

In an email Monday, Steve Bohlen, head of the state Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources, defended state regulators' enforcement of regulations regarding high-pressure steam injection.

"The regulations are outdated and do not adequately address current standard industry practices," Bohlen said. "We have been working with stakeholders to update the regulations governing this practice. In the meantime, we're working closer with operators on a case-by-case basis to ensure safe operations."

A spokesman for Chevron, Cameron Van Ast, said the oil company could not comment because the matter was subject to litigation.

State senators scheduled the hearing in the wake of critical reports by the U.S. and California environmental protection agencies from 2011. The federal and state federal environmental regulators found the state was in widespread violation of U.S. Safe Drinking Water Act laws meant to protect current and potential sources of drinking water from contamination by the oil and gas industry.

Between last summer and this month, the state shut down 23 oil-industry injection wells that it found state regulators had permitted to dump oil-industry wastewater into federally protected water aquifers.