

California begins process of creating oil buffer zones

By John Cox

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California's primary oil-regulating agency has kicked off an effort to standardize buffer zones between oil facilities and sensitive receptors such as schools and homes.

The initiative has been opposed by oil interests but supported by environmental justice activists who see it as a public health issue.

Public comment is being accepted until June 10. A series of online "community input meetings" has been scheduled, along with a computerized survey and other means for gathering input.

The California Geologic Energy Management Division, formerly known as the Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources, said the initiative reflects its "recently strengthened mission to protect public health, safety and the environment."

It is the latest in a years-long series of regulatory efforts that have inhibited oil production in the state.

Studies have come to different conclusions but many show there are health impacts such as respiratory ailments from living or working near oil and gas activities.

Environmental justice activists have promoted setbacks of 2,500 feet. Kern County requires oil and gas facilities in unincorporated parts of Kern be at least 210 feet from sensitive receptors. Arvin requires a 600-foot setback.

The Center on Race, Poverty, & the Environment sent a mass email Tuesday urging supporters to file comments with CalGEM.

"If we can flood their inbox, we have a chance to pass a groundbreaking 2,500-foot health and safety buffer zone that Californians need to stay safe," said the email from community organizer Juan Flores.

The state says 9,222 active oil or gas wells, and 6,511 idle wells, lie within 2,500 feet of sensitive receptors.

The California Independent Petroleum Association trade group said California oil producers operate under the world's strictest environmental standards. It said regulations that reduce in-state production only increase oil activity in places with lesser protections.

An industry-funded study released in October by the Los Angeles County Economic Development Corp. looked at potential impacts of buffer zones in Los Angeles. It predicted large taxpayer costs from compensating property owners for lost revenue, high litigation expenses and expensive clean-up work.

A legislative analysis last year said a bill creating 2,500-foot oil and gas buffers, if applied to existing production sites, would cost the state \$3.5 billion per year.

Anyone wishing to comment on the matter is invited to send emails to CalGEM at CalGEMRegulations@conservation.ca.gov. Comments can also be mailed to this address: Department of Conservation, 801 K Street, MS 24-02, Sacramento, CA 95814, ATTN: Public Health Near Oil & Gas Rulemaking.

An online survey set up to gather input is online at surveyMonkey.com/r/calgem-publichealth. Another system for providing comment is located online at sift.ly; the passcode to enter is "calgem".

Two "virtual community meetings" have been set up to discuss the proposal.

One, geared toward the Los Angeles area, is set for 10 a.m. to noon Wednesday. Register to attend at bit.ly/CalGEM-May20. People without Internet access can dial in by phone at 877-369-5243; the access code is 0326361##.

Another is scheduled for 1 to 3 p.m. June 2. Register at bit.ly/CalGEM-June2. Dial in by phone at 877-369-5243, access code 0333038##.