

Three Talking Points for Comments on Land Use Permit LP19-2019

(As of 5/18/2020—further citations to be added. Please use as starting points: these are meant to provoke thought and further discussion.)

In the midst of an oil market crash triggered by global oil oversupply and pandemic-extinguished demand, Contra Costa County has declared its eagerness to approve new oil and gas drilling in unincorporated Brentwood.

This, even as 40 tankers idle off the California coast, storing the surplus oil which the state's refineries can't begin to process.

In light of this, an application for exploratory oil and gas drilling in a depleted East County field might seem merely absurd. But it has potentially tragic dimensions as well, which the County chooses to ignore.

The County even fails to note the correct address of the proposed extraction site, erroneously listing Heidorn Ranch Road as "Hidden Valley Road." This is just one of many glaring inaccuracies, small and large, in its *Notice of Public Review and Intent to Adopt a Proposed Negative Declaration (NPR)*.

A. Drilling Has Negative Health Impacts

Oil and gas extraction releases dangerous air pollutants like benzene and hydrogen sulfide, and quantities of fine and ultra-fine particulate matter. Scientific research has extensively documented the health risks of living near oil and gas production. Wells can cause asthma and other respiratory illness, induce fetal harm, and increase the risk of cancer.¹ They can explode or spill toxic chemicals and pollute groundwater. The county staff who found the project's environmental and public health impacts "less than significant" ignore the growing body of research that cites the risks to people who live in close proximity to production sites.

Current proposed legislation, AB 345, calls for consideration of healthy and safety buffer zones of a minimum of 2,500 feet between oil and gas production sites and "sensitive receptors such as schools, childcare facilities, playgrounds, residences, hospitals, and health clinics based on health, scientific, and other data."²

2,500 feet is considered to be on the lower end of the range of distances that could reduce the harmful health and quality of life impacts from toxic emissions and exposures.³

The County states that the distance between the closest residence and the proposed site is 1,100 feet (PDF p. 16, *NPR*). Brentwood residents estimate much closer distances between their property and the proposed drilling site—anywhere from 700 to 900 feet.

Residents in Brentwood Hills, multiple nearby schools, health clinics, and Antioch Kaiser Permanente are all within unsafe distances from the proposed site.

Apparently the County is willing to expose its residents to known health risks so that an Indiana-based driller can contribute to fossil fuel oversupply.^{4,5}

References (to be expanded)

1. <https://www.dailycamera.com/2018/04/09/cancer-risk-higher-near-oil-and-gas-operations-colorado-study-finds/>; <https://pubs.acs.org/doi/10.1021/acs.est.7b05983>
2. See https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200AB345
3. https://www.stand.la/uploads/5/3/9/0/53904099/2500_literature_review_report-final_jul13.pdf
4. <https://www.biologicaldiversity.org/publications/papers/DangerNextDoor.pdf>
5. <https://lastchancealliance.org/reports-studies/>

B. California Does Not Need to Produce More Oil

California refineries actually produce more gasoline than we consume in-state. At present, 33% of the petroleum goods refined in California are produced for export. Refineries in the state import about 75% of the crude they process into gasoline and other products for domestic use and export; California crude makes up the remaining 25%. (See California Energy Commission stats.)

So would increasing California oil production eliminate the need to import foreign crude? This is a major rationale the County offers in its endorsement of the PowerDrive permit application. California oil fields have been seriously depleting over the last few decades. The oil industry has had to increasingly rely on “extreme extraction” methods such as hydraulic fracturing (fracking), gravel packing, cyclic steaming, and acidizing in order to coax out increasingly hard to reach oil from the ground. All of these methods are highly energy-intensive, frequently water-intensive, and environmentally hazardous, and they employ highly toxic chemicals with serious impacts on human health.

This is, in other words, a zero-sum game with diminishing returns and increasing risks.

PowerDrive, the applicant for the exploratory drilling in the Old Brentwood Oil and Gas Field, specializes in what it calls “rejuvenating” old and “neglected” fields. The County review is entirely silent about what methods PowerDrive will employ if it finds commercial quantities of oil in its first exploratory probes and then sets up permanent drilling.

C. Any New Fossil Fuel Extraction Contributes to Global Emissions

Contra Costa County is currently in the process of revising its Climate Action Plan, which is intended as a blueprint for enacting policies that promote sustainability and climate resilience. Ironically enough, that very Climate Action Plan, as well as the State of California's well-known commitment to greenhouse gas reduction, are both invoked in the *NPR* as reasons to increase fossil fuel extraction in the county. The logic employed here boggles the mind. Decreasing greenhouse gas levels demands a rapid transition away from dependence on fossil fuels, not doubling down on them.