



Health professionals celebrate California's historic oil drilling ban proposal

The draft rule will implement a 3,200-foot buffer zone between oil and gas facilities and vulnerable community sites, representing a monumental win for environmental justice advocates.

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Los Angeles (Oct. 21, 2021) — Gov. Gavin Newsom's administration announced that the California Geologic Energy Management Agency (CalGEM), the state's oil and gas regulator, has released a long-awaited draft rule banning new oil drilling within 3,200 feet of schools, hospitals, homes and other sensitive receptors. The regulation also strengthens pollution controls at existing oil wells that fall within the 3,200-foot exclusion area — the [largest buffer zone](#) between oil sites and communities to be implemented in the U.S.

The announcement reflects decades of advocacy by frontline communities, environmental justice advocates and PSR-LA. Health studies show that proximity to oil sites and their toxic pollutants increase individuals' risk of severe health issues, such as [respiratory illness](#), [birth defects](#) and [cancer](#). Low-income, Black and Latino residents are at an [especially high risk](#) of harmful exposure, with studies revealing that a disproportionate number of drilling sites are located in [marginalized communities](#).

"Today's announcement represents years of work by public health and environmental justice advocates to put health first after over a century of prioritizing oil company profits above health and safety. Gov. Newsom and his administration are now listening to the frontline communities and health professionals who have borne the burden of proving harm from oil extraction," said Martha Dina Argüello, executive director of PSR-LA. "We know there is no safe distance for oil and gas drilling, and until we phase out all drilling our communities will continue to be at risk from day-to-day operations and the continuous threat of catastrophic accidents like we saw in [Orange County](#)."

PSR-LA has a 40-year history of amplifying medical professional voices to advance public health and environmental justice. The [Health Ambassador Program](#) educates and trains professionals on environmental health issues, while building advocacy and organizing skills that help them better serve the communities they work in. PSR-LA has organized many Health Ambassador Program trainings to equip health professionals with the language and tools they need to fight alongside impacted communities against neighborhood oil drilling.

“There is an invisible, ongoing public health emergency in environmental justice communities that I see as a doctor. Patients are suffering from ongoing ailments connected to where they live and what they live next to,” said Dr. Saba Malik, MD, MPH. “We’re thrilled that Gov. Newsom and our elected officials are heeding the warnings of medical and scientific professionals, as well as the voices of the patients we treat whose lives are impacted.”

California is the seventh-largest oil producer in the country, and more than [2 million of the state's residents](#) live within 3,200 feet of an oil drilling facility. According to a Newsom administration spokesperson, approximately 32,400 wells fall within the 3,200-foot buffer zone.

“PSR-LA has been working with frontline communities and providing support since the first time we ever got a call about the smells, bloody noses and adult-onset asthma that was plaguing a South Los Angeles neighborhood, and we will continue to stand in solidarity until there is an end to neighborhood oil drilling,” said Argüello. “Today’s announcement is the outcome of health professionals and impacted communities fighting together for the collective goal of protecting public health.”

CalGEM’s proposal comes on the heels of [another environmental justice victory](#) in Los Angeles County, where the board of supervisors voted unanimously to ban new drill sites and phase out more than 1,600 oil and gas wells in the county’s unincorporated areas — including the Inglewood Oil Field, the largest urban oil field in the U.S.

“There is a strong and growing body of evidence of the health consequences for residents who live near oil and gas extraction,” said Bhavna Shamasunder, a professor and chair of Occidental College’s Urban & Environmental Policy and Public Health departments. “Residents also face multiple stressors from exposures linked with oil and gas extraction such as air and water pollution, noise, and odors. The phase out of drilling, as proposed by LA County, is the strongest public health protective measure, while setbacks and buffers as proposed by California today is a critical step that can help protect communities, and reduce proximity to hazards.”

The draft rule is set to take effect in 2023. In addition to the ban on new oil drilling sites, its improved safety regulations would require increased monitoring of emissions, leaks, vapors and groundwater at existing sites.

“Today’s announcement moves us closer to protecting the public’s health from unhealthy and noxious petrochemicals. For too long, Californians have been exposed to these chemicals that can cause respiratory diseases and cancer, among others,” said Dr. Felix Aguilar, MD. “Just as we protect marine life by banning off-shore drilling, it is time that we protect the life of all Californians from toxics coming from oil and gas drilling.”

“As a frontline physician, I see countless patients suffering from chronic diseases that stem from exposure to the environment, and we continue to see how these diseases are exacerbated by COVID-19,” said Dr. Lorenzo Gonzalez, MD, MPL. “This announcement is a promising step toward healing hurt communities and preventing future harm.”

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Physicians for Social Responsibility-Los Angeles (PSR-LA) advocates for policies that protect public health from nuclear and environmental threats and eliminate health disparities. For more information, visit psr-la.org.