



This article was printed from the Local Stories section of the *Sacramento News & Review*, originally published August 25, 2011.

This article may be read online at:

<http://www.newsreview.com/sacramento/content?oid=3356326>

Copyright ©2011 Chico Community Publishing, Inc.

Printed on 2011-08-29.

Fracking in Sacramento: Gasland cometh?

Controversial natural-gas ‘fracking’ creeps its way toward Sacramento

By [Hugh Biggar](#)

It is coming to the Sacramento Valley. It may signal its arrival with a vibrating rumble. Or it may come on quiet cat feet, but with a snout that digs deep into the earth. Or it may already be here: There are no state rules monitoring it at the moment, so the whereabouts or size and shape of this thing are a little uncertain.

The “it” in question is fracking, or the controversial extraction of oil and gas through high-pressure injection of water, sand and chemicals into deep underground rock. In other states, fracking has generated backlash over environmental and public-health issues.

And now, here in Sacramento, Colorado-based company Venoco plans for up to 20 fracking wells in the area, including the nearby Delta, in addition to Willows and Grimes fields in Sutter and Yuba counties, the Dutch Slough fields 90 minutes southwest of the city, plus others locations in Glenn and Colusa counties and Union Island in San Joaquin County.

Concerns about fracking’s environmental impact—not to mention a scene from fracking documentary *Gasland*, where a man lights methane-heavy water coming out of his kitchen faucet on fire—is reason for alarm. And such concerns have led to improved regulation in other states.

But in California, the state’s regulating agency, the Division of Oil, Gas & Geothermal Resources, has maintained fracking is used too infrequently to be a concern, and therefore needs minimal oversight.

This soon could change. At the Capitol, a bill by a Northern California Assembly member aims to make the state pay closer attention to fracking.



A scene from the Oscar-nominated documentary *Gasland*, where residents near a fracking well light their sink water on fire. A Colorado-based company intends to bring fracking to the Sacramento Basin. PHOTO courtesy of gasland

Assembly Bill 591, which has passed one house and now awaits a vote in the Senate, would require more transparency about the location of drilling wells, the amount and source of water used, the chemicals involved and whether there is radioactive waste. At the moment, companies are not required to share this information.

Unbeknownst to many, fracking has been in place in California since the 1950s, in mostly southern parts of the state, but more recently along parts of the Central Coast, which is heavy in shale. Nearby drilling sites north of Stockton traditionally haven't used high-pressure extraction, in large part because of the area's sandy, permeable soil, which is not fracking-friendly.

But Venoco, the Colorado-based company that wants to drill near Sacramento, recently reported to investors of plans "to perform 220 recompletions [or reusing existing wells] and perform 20 fracs in the Sacramento Basin." Other Venoco reports indicate past plans for fracking in the region.

The future yield of these sites remains unknown, but Tupper Hull, a vice president with the Western States Petroleum Association in Sacramento, says there is no reason for concern.

"There has been hydraulic fracturing in the state for 40 years, and it has never been a problem," he told SN&R.

But given the lack of detailed fracking information, others are not so sure, and see A.B. 591 as a way to better assess the situation.



"We haven't had the horror stories they have had elsewhere," conceded Bill Allayaud, with the Environmental Working Group, "but need to get a better handle on it.

"We hope it's true there are no pollutants [in the water]," he added.

In particular, Allayaud expressed concern about unknowns such as long-term water quality and seismic activity near fracks. In Arkansas, for instance, the injection of water into underground areas led to small earthquakes.

"We don't know if it could awaken a sleeping fault here," Allayaud warned. "And if there are contaminants in the water that are then injected far below the surface, what if that deep water becomes tomorrow's drinking water?"

The approximate location of three of Venoco's proposed hydraulic fracturing wells, the nearest being 60 miles southwest of downtown Sacramento. Venoco also plans to use some 220 existing wells in the Sacramento Basin.

Deb Nardone, who works on natural-gas reform issues for the Sierra Club, shares Allayaud's concerns. She would like A.B. 591 to include obligatory advance notice to landowners that fracking is taking place nearby, because some techniques, such as slant drilling, can make it hard to discern what is being tapped. This warning also would allow landowners to better manage the before-and-after quality of their water, she explained, noting that other states such as Wyoming have mandated advanced notification.

"Those who say water contamination is not a concern should have a little star attached to that statement," Nardone said. "It comes with caveats." She noted that wastewater is often re-injected or absorbed into the ground, or stored on the surface in tanks, which could leak in time.

She also questioned the intensive amount of water used during fracking. The practice involves high-pressure

cocktails of up to 99 percent water and sand, with the rest chemicals. As part of that, a single frack can use from 3 million to 5 million gallons of water.

“This is a huge concern,” she said, pointing to Texas, where a severe drought is compounding concerns about hydraulic fracturing.

“Fracturing is really water-intensive,” she said. “And in states with water shortages, the continued use of water is a major concern.”

The WSPA’s Hull, though, said many of these concerns are merely hype due to the recent increase of fracking and a documentary, *Gasland*, which was nominated for an Oscar last year. Hull instead stressed that the practice helps ensure the United States’ “energy security” and also keeps natural-gas prices lower for consumers and businesses.

“There are real benefits,” he argued, adding that his group is mostly on board with the bill, except for parts that would disclose what he calls “trade secrets,” or information revealing individual companies’ particular recipe for extraction.

“This bill is a first step in getting a handle on hydraulic fracturing,” explained Ben Turner, legislative director for A.B. 591’s sponsor, Assemblyman Bob Wieckowski. “[We have] very little information on where, how often, and using what chemicals.”

At the same time, with A.B. 591 pending, Allayaud wonders what lies ahead, noting there are natural-gas wells all over the Sacramento area, with many capped and abandoned, but some still open.

“They are looking at newer, deeper deposits, because there are only finite amounts,” he said. “We ought to be on top of this as fracking develops.”