

https://www.bakersfield.com/news/state-finds-27-oil-wells-leaking-methane-in-arvin-lamont-area/article_52120332-00da-11ee-b466-83e7f8b280c5.html

State finds 27 oil wells leaking methane in Arvin-Lamont area

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In this Californian file photo, an oil pumping unit and storage tank near Shane Court in Arvin is surrounded by residential apartments, single-family homes and commercial businesses.

Californian file photo

Leaky oil wells are raising health and safety concerns in Kern County again after inspectors found 27 sites in the Arvin-Lamont area — 40% of the total tested recently by a state task force — were emitting methane unchecked.

The findings unsettled some members of the community after it was announced during a meeting Wednesday. On Thursday, environmental justice advocates called for additional testing and direct notification to neighbors.



Word of uncontrolled methane releases was a reminder of the 45 oil wells found to be leaking the potent greenhouse gas in and around Bakersfield last year. Those leaks have since been addressed — more than once, in several cases, owing to recurring leaks. Their discovery led state officials to convene the task force whose members identified the leaks disclosed this week.

A spokesman for the state's primary oil and gas regulator, the California Geologic Energy Management division, said by email Thursday that most of the wells' operators were present for the inspections and have since reported having repaired the leaks. He said state inspectors are being sent to confirm the repairs.

But in the case of 11 of the leaky wells, the parties responsible have indicated they do not intend to fix them. CalGEM spokesman Jacob Roper said those same operators have ignored state orders to properly plug the wells, and that the agency "is working on an emergency contract to have those wells fixed as soon as possible." He wrote that money to do so will come from a fund covered by industry fees.

Greater detail was not available from Wednesday's community presentation by CalGEM, the California Air Resources Board and the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District. But groups worried about the findings said it was stated at the meeting that the wells inspected were located within 3,200 feet of homes and schools in the Arvin-Lamont area. They said three of the wells found to be leaking are located within 1,000 feet of a school.

"Orphan and idle wells that are left unplugged and unmonitored are a ticking time bomb of health and safety risks consistently impacting communities in the Central Valley," stated a news release issued Thursday on behalf of environmental justice groups active in the region.

While methane releases have become a priority for state policymakers trying to address climate change, the concern at oil wells is different. Residents have expressed concerns the gas presents health risks as well as safety worries, even as officials say the leaks pose a minimal threat because the gas disperses quickly and does not accumulate enough to ignite.

Cesar Aguirre, a community organizer with the Central California Environmental Justice Network, said by email non-methane toxic and cancerous gases could still be in the air near the leaky wells. He noted that when similar releases were discovered in Bakersfield, state officials responded by taking samples and going door to door monitoring for methane.

"The governor and his agencies should treat Arvin and Lamont with the same respect" paid to Bakersfield residents, Aguirre wrote.

Byanka Santoyo, a community organizer with the Center on Race, Poverty & The Environment, said she was thankful state legislation has given communities such as Arvin special authority to take action against pollution in their areas.



"I think it's concerning," she said, "but at the same time, it is assuring that we do have that collaboration between the local enforcers, the state agencies and whoever is responsible for all these toxins that should be cleaned up."

A staff attorney with CRPE, Kayla Karimi, called the 40% rate of leakage "extremely alarming and unacceptable."

"These agencies must do more to ensure wells are being properly managed, and we must end neighborhood drilling to ensure our communities are safe," she said by email.

Editor's note: The headline on this story has been corrected to state 27 leaky oil wells were discovered.

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