

[Bakersfield Californian editorial, Sunday, April 7, 2013](#)

CEQA revisions must stay on the table

When Michael Rubio abruptly resigned from the state Senate in February, what appeared to be a core component of his rising influence, a reworking of portions of the California Environmental Quality Act, came to a screeching halt.

This was not welcome news for those who believe that in far too many cases, CEQA is used as a NIMBY (not in my backyard) tool or an ideological wedge to disrupt development, rather than for the environmental protection purposes it was intended.

Rubio, a moderate Democrat, was spearheading what he thought would be a major rewrite of CEQA, to the displeasure of environmentalists but with the support of many Republicans and Democratic Gov. Jerry Brown. But the bill that came out of Rubio's work alongside Darrell Steinberg, the state Senate president pro tem, was considerably watered down from what many had expected, and Rubio resigned that same day.

Now, a Modesto-area Republican state senator, Tom Berryhill, has stepped in. He said he intends to continue with the work Rubio abandoned when he bolted for a lucrative oil industry job. "A great idea is a great idea," Berryhill said in a news release. "It is not Democrat or Republican; it is just a good idea that should have been passed last year if it weren't for the Democrat leadership sidelining it. Frankly, I am here to get stuff done. My district still has double digit unemployment. This is a jobs issue to me."

Like Rubio, Berryhill is not targeting the entire CEQA, an effective and important piece of legislation intended to protect California's diverse and fragile environment. The concern is the political use of CEQA by groups that use the act as a hammer, stalling and eventually killing projects they oppose with litigation. The ripple effect can be extensive -- a chief casualty, of course, being job creation.

That's the gist of the reform Rubio sought, and presumably what Berryhill will pursue. "CEQA would continue to mandate comprehensive environmental review, disclosure and informed public debate for all environmental impacts of any proposed development," Berryhill announced. Rightly so.

Here in Kern County, where the jobless rate is 13.6 percent, it shouldn't matter whether CEQA revisions are pushed by a Democrat or a Republican, or whether reform is championed by a homegrown politician or one who represents Californians 200 miles to the north. What matters most is that CEQA be used as it was intended -- as a tool to preserve environmental quality, not a legal stall tactic. Parsing one from the other in the language of a new bill might be difficult -- one man's legitimate opposition is another man's sabotage -- but the Legislature owes us its best effort to sort it out.

Dreams of black gold in the Valley's shale oil deposits

By Lewis Griswold

The Fresno Bee, Sunday April 7, 2013

An oil drilling rig off a rural road in southern Kings County and others like it springing up in the Valley could be the key to newfound wealth and prosperity for California, although at an uncertain cost to the environment.

The exploratory wells are seeking Monterey shale, a massive and deep formation of oil-bearing rock that lies under much of the western San Joaquin Valley from Modesto to Bakersfield.

The shale holds an estimated 15 billion barrels of recoverable oil. If put into full-scale production, hundreds of thousands of jobs would be created statewide, and state and local governments would reap billions of dollars in tax revenues, according to a recent economic analysis by the University of Southern California.

Extracting the oil requires the use of hydraulic fracturing, or "fracking," a controversial method in which chemical-laden water is injected into the ground, which opponents say can contaminate groundwater and even cause earthquakes.

But the prospect of new tax revenues and good-paying jobs after years of recession is hard for California politicians to pass up.

"Just imagine what state and local governments could do with that amount of revenues," said Assembly Member Henry T. Perea, D-Fresno. "This could bring a whole new generation into the middle class."

Job boom

The USC study released last month predicts the Monterey shale oil boom could generate 512,000 to 2.8 million new jobs between 2015 and 2030, and tax revenues of \$4.5 billion to \$24.6 billion.

Kings County Supervisor Richard Valle said oil-related jobs already are coming to the area.

He said an executive at a Canadian oil company told him the company signed a large contract with a trucking company in Coalinga, and oil field workers are arriving from outside the area to operate drill rigs.

The USC study anticipates oil development beginning in 2015, with the number of new jobs peaking in 2020 followed by a gradual decline.

But California's newest oil boom is far from certain.

Tupper Hull, spokesman for the Western States Petroleum Association, a trade group of oil producers and refiners, said the industry isn't speculating when production from the Monterey shale could begin.

"It's not like the Bakken," he said, referring to the shale oil boom in North Dakota. "California geology is much more jumbled. There are some technical and practical issues to work out."

The Monterey shale under the Valley and part of Southern California is 8,000 to 14,000 feet deep. It's by far the largest shale formation in the country, representing 64% of total shale oil reserves in the United States, according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

Its existence has been known for years, but advances in horizontal drilling techniques -- the drill hole goes straight down for more than a mile before turning horizontal -- combined with fracking now make profitable oil extraction possible, Hull said.

Fresno County tax assessor Paul Dictos said oil production from the Monterey shale is a big topic of conversation among tax assessors from oil-producing areas, who hold an annual meeting to examine oil prices and production trends.

"It's huge," Dictos said. "We expect California to boom."

Assuming that oil prices don't collapse, the assessed value of oil-producing properties should rise and result in more property tax revenues, he said.

Preparing to pump

The exploratory well in Kings County between Corcoran and Kettleman City is a project of Aera Energy, a Bakersfield oil production company controlled by affiliates of ExxonMobil and Shell. It began drilling the well in early February and will stop in June.

"We're part of the larger story" of oil companies getting in position to tap the Monterey shale, said Susan Hersberger, public affairs director for the company.

Most oil companies aren't saying that they're drilling test wells into the shale. But 12 exploratory well permits have been issued by the California Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources in the Coalinga District that includes Fresno, Kings and Madera counties, although it's unclear how many were seeking the Monterey shale due to confidentiality rules.

In Kern County, 80 such permits were issued last year.

Although fracking is not taking place now at the Kings County exploratory well, the technique eventually will be used there to find out how much oil the well can produce, Hersberger said.

Fracking involves injecting fluid under great pressure into the shale, which scientists say is even less permeable than granite. The pressure fractures the rock, creating cracks about as wide as a pencil into which oil in the rock layer drains and can be pumped out, she said.

Because the shale is more than a mile below the surface at its shallowest, "it's just virtually impossible for there to be a connection between the fracturing and water," she said.

The fracking fluid is composed of 95% water, 4.5% sand and a half percent of "various chemicals," she said.

Few, if any, cases of groundwater contamination from wells where fracking took place nearby have occurred, said Hull of the Western States Petroleum Association.

"There's a lot of mythology and a lot of emotion about fracking," Hull said. "Fracking has been used for decades in California."

But the Center for Biological Diversity, an environmental advocacy group based in Tucson, Ariz., said fracking chemicals such as benzene have been found in groundwater in Wyoming and Pennsylvania.

"It's not right to say there's no risk," said Kassie Siegel, an attorney for the environmental group.

There may be no proven cases of fracking fluid migrating from deep underground into water supplies, but it could take decades to rise through natural cracks in the earth, she said.

Wells that leak and surface spills are more common than the industry wants to admit, she said.

Farmers should be especially concerned, because contaminated water could affect crop irrigation, Siegel said.

The California Farm Bureau Federation hasn't taken a position on fracking.

Fracking also emits hazardous air pollutants and the greenhouse gas methane, and studies have shown that injection of fluid into the ground can cause seismic activity, Siegel said.

But according to the state Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources, fracking doesn't cause earthquakes.

"Since 1947, more than 1 million oil and gas wells have been hydraulically fractured with no recorded instances of triggered earthquakes," the division said last year.

Seismic activity linked to fracking involves "long-duration, high volume injection of waste fluids in disposal wells," and such wells in California haven't caused earthquakes, the division said.

In January, the Center for Biological Diversity sued California seeking a court order compelling regulators to enforce existing laws and regulations governing oil drilling and fluid injection that the center alleges are being ignored.

A month before the lawsuit was filed, the Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources said it was developing fracking regulations and released a "discussion draft" but had yet to begin a formal rule-making process.

Meanwhile, bills to regulate fracking have been introduced in the Legislature.

But Perea, the Assembly member from Fresno, said the Legislature should wait for state agencies to propose regulations.

"The discussion is better left to the regulators and not with the politicians," Perea said. "We've been doing fracking for decades. I'm not aware of any major incidents."

Merced County wants input on transportation plan

By Ramona Giwargis

Merced Sun-Star, Monday, April 8, 2013

Whether you drive, bike or take a bus, the Merced County Association of Governments wants to hear from you.

MCAG is seeking public input on the area's long-range Regional Transportation Plan, which looks at all transportation options in the county and funding for improvement projects.

"We'll be sharing the funding outlook and asking for their general thoughts," said Matt Fell, MCAG's planning manager. "Would they like to see more money go to maintenance? Would they like to see more money go to the bus system?"

MCAG will hold four workshops for the public to discuss these topics, Fell said.

MCAG can fund one-third of road maintenance over the next 25 years, Fell said. This includes everything from filling potholes to complete road reconstruction.

MCAG can also fund one-fifth of major roadway improvements, including those to highway 99, Fell said. "We're specifically focused on how to fund all of the improvements that we need in the long term," he noted.

Lori Flanders, public information officer with MCAG, said people attending the workshops will have the opportunity to be heard by decision-makers.

"They can expect to have a voice when it comes to the future of transportation," Flanders said. "We want their feedback on what's most important to them when it comes funding these projects."

MCAG officials also want to know how the county can cut down on the number of cars on the road in an effort to reduce carbon dioxide emissions.

The effort is prompted by Assembly Bill 32, which passed in 2006, and requires agencies to reduce greenhouse gases by 5 percent by 2020.

"They're living in the community, so we need to know the best ways to get from point A to point B, while still meeting the state-mandated legislation to reduce greenhouse gas emissions," Flanders said.

The MCAG Regional Transportation Plan workshops, which all start at 6 p.m., will be held:

April 8 -- Golden Valley Health Center's Senior & Wellness Center, 857 W. Childs Ave.

April 10 -- Merced Civic Center, Sam Pipes Room, 678 W. 18th St.

April 11 -- Livingston City Council chamber, 1416 C St.

April 15 -- Atwater Community Center, 760 E. Bellevue Road.

Free smog emission tests

Stockton Record, Tuesday, April 2, 2013

STOCKTON - Motorists can test their smog emissions and receive vouchers for hundreds of dollars in free repairs at an event Saturday.

The latest Tune In & Tune Up event is set for 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. at the San Joaquin County Fairgrounds. Arrive early and expect a two-hour wait, organizers said.

Each car will be tested for smog emissions. Owners of cars that fail the test will be eligible for \$500 repair vouchers at participating shops, while supplies last.

The idea is to help people clean up dirtier cars and legally register them. The event does not take the place of a formal smog test, however.

Sponsors include the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District and Valley Clean Air Now. For more details, call (800) 806-2004.