



Environmental regulators: Put people before industry



BY **JUAN FLORES** POSTED 06.04.2019

Recently, the Trump administration's Environmental Protection Agency offered another boon to the fossil fuel industry and announced its intent to ignore the scientifically-proven impacts of air pollution on human health.

By minimizing and outright denying the health risks of air pollution, the EPA is recklessly devaluing the lives of children and families who are assaulted daily by pollution and climate impacts that threaten their health, safety, and life expectancy.

For Californians who live with some of the worst air pollution in the nation, this move is egregious. And for people in my community, who are at the front lines of the root cause of the climate crisis and daily breathe the toxic emissions of oil drilling operations, it means further placing our lives on the line in favor of industry economics.

The 5.4 million Californians living within a mile of at least one of the 84,000 existing oil and gas wells have no one considering the value of our lives.

But this isn't the first time our community has been betrayed by a public agency sworn to protect our health and safety.

I live in Kern County, where the oil industry has a stranglehold on our lungs, our local economy, and our elected leaders. Our state's regulatory agency tasked with oversight of the outsized and calamitous oil industry is the Department of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources (DOGGR).

Yet, through the years, DOGGR has failed to fulfill a fundamental duty — to protect life and the welfare of California’s residents.

Rather, our tax dollars fund an agency that seeks to facilitate the oil industry’s dirty business, failing its legal mandate to also protect residents’ health and safety.

When residents call for needed protections, a common response from the agency is to first preoccupy itself with the economic cost to the industry, disregarding the cost to our lives. It fails to consider the medical costs we bear from asthma and other illnesses related to toxic emissions and air pollutants from drilling operations. Or the cost to children and parents missing school or work from the same.

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There is an unconscionable cost to children exposed to carcinogens and other chemicals that increase their risk of developing cancer and chronic illnesses. And there is the cost of decreased life expectancy.

Despite numerous studies showing negative health impacts to communities living near oil and gas development, DOGGR has consistently worked to support industry, failing to make the process more transparent for communities, and allowing oil drilling to continue dangerously close to homes and schools.

The 5.4 million Californians living within a mile of at least one of the 84,000 existing oil and gas wells have no one considering the value of our lives. Rather than ask how many wells may be impacted by a health protective measure, when will our regulators instead question how many lives will be protected?

State regulatory agencies like DOGGR have a responsibility to address the legacy of pollution in low-income communities and communities of color, not simply to prevent future harms, but also to provide redress for the impacts of long-standing, disproportionate burdens of pollution.

In Kern County, like in many communities across our state, we are living in a state of public health and climate crisis that is beyond regulation. After years of being failed by every regulatory agency from the federal EPA to California’s own DOGGR, the only thing that will do is transformative action that protects our health and our climate. Some may call this a Green New Deal; my community calls it respect for our right to live in a healthy community.

We need to move beyond broken regulatory systems that fail to value human life and instead embrace environmental justice. We need Governor Gavin Newsom to take up

the mantle of climate leadership that Jerry Brown refused and that President Trump denies: phasing out fossil fuel drilling must start where it's harming Californians most.

The kind of action that our communities—and our climate future—desperately need cannot be left to be decided by DOGGR, which has proven dismissive at best, hostile at worst.

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Ed's Note: Juan Flores is a community organizer for the Center on Race, Poverty & the Environment, a national environmental justice organization.