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Protecting Communities Near Oil and Gas Drilling Operations in Los Angeles County

At the turn of the twentieth century, oil and gas development dominated the Los Angeles County (County) landscape fueled by minimal regulations, little understanding of the health and environmental impacts, and low population density. However, over the next century, the population and need for housing in the region grew significantly, which led to less separation between industrial and residential areas, especially in residential areas where communities of color could afford to live, or were forced to live due to discriminatory land-use policies. Today, tens of thousands of County residents live in close proximity to an oil well; nearly 73 percent of whom are people of color. Within the boundaries of the unincorporated County alone, there are approximately 1,600 active and idle oil wells. Over half of those wells are within the Inglewood Oil Field, the largest urban oil field in the nation, located in the Baldwin Hills community in the County’s Second Supervisorial District.

A substantial body of national and California-based scientific research documents evidence the harmful health impacts resulting from living in close proximity to oil drilling operations, including asthma, cardiovascular disease, low birth weight, and reproductive health impacts. [A study](#) of oil drill sites in South Los Angeles published by the scientific

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journal, Environmental Research in June 2021, documents a significant decrease in lung and pulmonary function associated with living near both active and inactive oil wells. A 2018 [Los Angeles County Department of Public Health Report](#) found that even at a distance of 1,500 feet, oil wells still pose a safety risk to nearby communities. In addition, recent studies from [Harvard](#) and the [American Lung Association](#) point to the connections between fossil fuel-related air pollution and premature death. These health impacts are a result of the particulate matter and toxic pollutants, such as volatile organic compounds, released from oil and gas extraction. Surprisingly, health protections and mitigation measures at oil production sites are not standardized across the County, which often results in low-income and marginalized communities disproportionately suffering from poor health due to the lack of strictly-enforced regulatory controls.

In recent years, the County has made efforts to better regulate oil drilling operations and prioritize the public health and safety of its residents living near oil wells. This includes the creation of the [Baldwin Hills Community Standards District \(BHCS D\)](#) in 2008, which established stricter regulations, safeguards, and controls for oil and gas production activities at the Inglewood Oil Field following a series of gas release and odor events in the Baldwin Hills area. However, despite the additional regulations imposed by the BHCS D, residents of neighboring communities, which are largely communities of color, continue to express serious concern about odors, noises, and the impacts of spills, the most recent of which occurred in April 2021. This latest incident was prominently covered in the [media](#).

The County has acknowledged the need to be more informed about existing oil and gas operations and more coordinated in protecting public and environmental health. In July 2015, the County Board of Supervisors (Board) requested an inventory of all oil and gas fields in unincorporated areas and the level of monitoring taking place at these facilities. Subsequently in March 2016, the Board directed the Department of Regional Planning (DRP) to convene a Strike Team to assess public health and safety risks associated with existing oil and gas facilities in the unincorporated County areas. In addition, the Board directed DRP to update the County's Zoning Code to ensure that: 1) regulations reflect best practices and current mitigation methods, minimize environmental

impacts, and protect sensitive uses and populations; and 2) that oil and gas facilities may no longer operate by right in the unincorporated portions of the County, except within the BHCS D. In September 2017, the Strike Team submitted a [report](#) to the Board outlining recommendations for updating the County's outdated Zoning Code that has allowed oil and gas production activities to occur dangerously close to residences, schools, and other sensitive land uses. The Strike Team's last report will be submitted to the Board this fall, at which time their work will be complete.

The growing body of scientific and public health evidence demonstrating the health, safety, and climate threats posed by oil and gas extraction has led to increased support for stronger regulations as well as the call to phase out urban oil drilling in its entirety. In 2019, the Board adopted the [OurCounty Sustainability Plan](#) (OurCounty Plan), an equity-focused, stakeholder-driven process that identified goals, strategies, and actions to achieve a shared vision for a sustainable County. Two actions identified in the OurCounty Plan include: 1) addressing the proximity between oil and gas operations and sensitive land uses; and 2) developing a sunset strategy for oil and gas operations. Other jurisdictions in the County are pursuing these actions as well. The City of Los Angeles is currently considering a policy to address urban oil drilling as an incompatible land use throughout the city. Decision-makers in Culver City, where a portion of the Inglewood Oil Field is located, recently approved a full phase-out of oil and gas drilling operations over the next five years. These local actions are set against the backdrop of Governor Newsom's recent directive to phase out oil extraction across the state by 2045, signaling California's commitment to addressing the climate impacts caused by oil and gas extraction.

Just last month, the United Nations' Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change released [a report](#) with a dire forecast, that the impacts of climate change will continue to intensify over the next 30 years and there is a short window to curb fossil fuel emissions to prevent an even worse fate for our environment and current and future generations. The County should not wait to act. As DRP is currently updating oil and gas well regulations for unincorporated areas outside of the BHCS D, there is an opportunity for the County to demonstrate leadership on climate change, environmental justice, and

public health. Furthermore, the County is poised to leverage its efforts to develop a just transition approach to phasing out oil drilling, first initiated by Board action in 2020. Building upon this existing effort, the County can proactively plan for a long-term just transition strategy informed by the needs of impacted workers and frontline communities, while addressing the long-standing health and environmental impacts facing communities across the County, including the Baldwin Hills area.

WE THEREFORE MOVE THAT THE BOARD OF SUPERVISORS:

1. Instruct the Director of Department of Regional Planning (DRP), in coordination with the Chief Sustainability Office (CSO) and the Director of the Los Angeles Department of Public Health (DPH), to:
 - a. Modify the pending Draft Oil Well Ordinance for unincorporated Los Angeles County (County) as directed by the Board of Supervisors' (Board) March 29, 2016 motion as follows:
 - i. Prohibit all new oil and gas extraction wells in all zones, including those allowed or planned for under existing discretionary permits; and
 - ii. Designate all existing oil and gas extraction activities, including those allowed or planned for under existing discretionary permits, as legal nonconforming uses in all zones.
2. Instruct the Director of DRP, in collaboration with the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), to report back to the Board in writing within 120 days detailing the process for selecting and contracting with an expert/consultant to conduct an amortization study of oil and gas drill sites in the unincorporated areas of the County to determine the most accelerated phase out period that is legally justifiable and recommendations to guide a phase-out process. This report should include, without limitation:
 - a. An initial written progress report to the Board within 60 days with the estimated cost and identification of potential funding sources to pay for the amortization study, including utility franchise fees, and state and federal

- funds for just transition efforts. The report should also include recommendations for the most expeditious and cost-effective completion of the amortization study, including studying a representative sample of drill sites by type, and use of existing data from the Los Angeles County Oil and Gas Strike Team reports and relevant amortization studies where possible;
- b. An analysis of the feasibility of a 5-year phase-out period as outlined in Culver City's amortization program;
 - c. Recommendations on how the Board can effectuate the closure of wells using a data-driven health and environmental equity approach; and
 - d. Recommendations on the engagement of diverse community stakeholders throughout the phase out, remediation, and process for visioning future land uses.
3. Instruct the Director of DRP, in collaboration with County Counsel, to update the Baldwin Hills Community Standards District (which expires in 2028) to be consistent with the final updates to Title 22 Zoning Code for new and existing oil and gas extraction activities; and
 4. Instruct the Directors of the Department of Public Works, DRP, DPH, and Fire in consultation with the CSO and CEO Legislative Affairs and Intergovernmental Relations to coordinate with state elected officials and relevant state and regional agencies, including California Geologic Energy Management Division California Air Resources Board, California Environmental Protection Agency, and South Coast Air Quality Management District to ensure funding and implementation of annual inspections, ongoing air monitoring, and health impact assessment data continue to be collected and used to prioritize and facilitate the timely phase out of existing wells.

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