



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

June 22, 2021

Kobi Naseck, VISION, kobi@vision-ca.org, (214) 609-2439
Riddhi Patel, CRPE, rpatel@crpe-ej.org, (661) 865-4881

California Delays Oil and Gas Health Buffers Yet Again

CalGEM misses crucial deadline to protect communities from neighborhood oil and gas drilling

Sacramento, CA – Yesterday, the California Geologic Energy Management (CalGEM) missed yet another deadline to draft public health regulation on neighborhood oil and gas drilling despite months of waiting and assurances that a draft rule would be released by Spring 2021. This is the second major delay in the release of a “discussion draft” of the rule, after the agency failed to release a rule by the end of 2020.

CalGEM was tasked with developing a proposed oil and gas buffer rule by Governor Gavin Newsom in a November 2019 directive. The directive, which was applauded by environmental justice communities and advocates, required the Department of Conservation to establish a transparent set of rules to protect residents living near oil and gas extraction sites. CalGEM, however, continues to drag its feet. More than five million Californians live within a mile of active oil and gas operations.

Proximity to oil production sites increases exposure to toxic chemicals and byproducts of California's industrial oil operations, which take place just feet away from homes, schools, parks, and hospitals. For years, affected frontline residents and environmental justice advocates have called on CalGEM to consider the health impacts of neighborhood oil and gas drilling, including: preterm birth, low birth weights, asthma and other respiratory diseases, hospitalization for heart failure, fatigue, stress, severe cases of COVID-19 and cancers.¹² In California, neighborhood oil and gas extraction threatens life expectancy and overwhelmingly affects low-income communities and Black, Indigenous, Latinx and other communities of color, a clear form of environmental racism.

This summer, those same residents left unprotected from neighborhood oil and gas drilling are also facing increasingly dangerous air pollution, wildfire smoke, and heat.

In early 2020, CalGEM convened a set of pre-rulemaking public health workshops, and the agency later received an executive order from Governor Gavin Newsom that set a deadline for a

¹<https://ehp.niehs.nih.gov/doi/full/10.1289/EHP5842>

² https://www.oxy.edu/sites/default/files/assets/UEP/letter_city_oil_report_health_impacts_10.11.19.pdf

draft rule on setbacks by December 31, 2020. Thousands of frontline community residents and environmental advocates attended in-person and online webinars hosted by CalGEM to urge the agency to develop a 2,500-foot health and safety buffer to protect communities. Over 40,000 public comments overwhelmingly in support of a minimum 2,500 ft setback were submitted, the most received in the agency's history, yet CalGEM missed the December 2020 deadline to produce a health rule. The agency then took months to contract academic public health experts to weigh in, though the state's own scientists already identified the health threats posed by proximity to oil sites six years ago. The results of the public health expert panel's recommendation have not been made public, nor has a draft rule been released.

Below, frontline community members and VISION member organizations offer some statements regarding the missed deadline:

"This delay is sadly unsurprising. For communities like ours that live in these conditions every day, we are forgotten and never prioritized. We are told our lives and well-being do not matter as much as their political ambitions. The public supports this, scientific evidence supports this, and we continue to see that our loved ones are dying. We have seen both the California legislature and the Governor continue to fail us and view us as expendable. How long will we have to wait for our lives to mean as much as theirs?" **said Anabel Marquez, President of the Committee for a Better Shafter.**

"How much longer are our communities supposed to wait? This delay is just another in a long line that reinforces California's legacy of environmental racism and injustice. VISION will keep fighting for setbacks and to protect all residents from the possibility of Big Oil setting up shop across the street to pollute our homes and schools" said **Kobi Naseck, Coalition Coordinator, Voices in Solidarity Against Oil in Neighborhoods (VISION).**

"We are dismayed that CalGEM has further delayed critical public health protections and relief from fossil fuel pollution for frontline communities by not releasing the draft rule. The science is clear: 2500ft or greater setbacks between communities and oil/gas production sites can reduce exposure to carcinogens and other air toxics. There is no excuse for the delay nor for withholding the public health panel's recommendations, while continuing to expand fossil fuel operations that endanger the health and safety of communities of color." **said Neena Mohan, Climate Justice Manager, California Environmental Justice Alliance (CEJA).**

"For our communities, this delay is more than just a bureaucratic misstep," **said Dr. Catherine Garoupa White, Executive Director of the Central Valley Air Quality Coalition (CVAQ).** "For us, it means more emergency room visits, more cancer diagnoses, and more missed days of school and work from asthma attacks and other health impacts. Despite the epidemic levels of sickness in the San Joaquin Valley caused by being one of the most polluted air basins in the nation for particle and ozone pollution, our state and local governments refuse to do the bare minimum to protect people from the oil and gas industry's harmful pollutants: We demand 2,500 setbacks now."

"Dangerous air has set environmental justice communities back for long enough. Putting off the long overdue protections shows Californians that CalGEM is still willing to sacrifice low-income communities. It is clear CalGEM does not respect the urgency needed to prevent further damage and inequity in our communities. Living in proximity to oil operations causes birth defects, respiratory damage, and exposes Californians to cancer causing chemicals. The

science is clear, lack of action is disrespectful to environmental justice communities. We deserve better," said **Cesar Aguirre, community organizer with Central California Environmental Justice Network**

"Public health leaders have been ringing the alarm about the adverse health impacts of living near oil drilling for decades. There is a growing body of evidence that living near oil and gas wells adversely impacts health including increases in preterm birth that can have lasting negative impacts on both mother and child," said **Martha Dina Arguello, Executive Director, Physicians for Social Responsibility - Los Angeles**. "The delayed health and safety rule is another disappointing failure of leadership. Elected officials and regulators must do their jobs and protect the health of people living next to this inherently dangerous practice."

"Our communities cannot wait any longer. Our lives and health cannot be overlooked for the sake of the oil industry. This delay will continue to affect the health of thousands of frontline communities who live in close proximity to these sites," said **Wendy Miranda, Wilmington resident with Communities for A Better Environment**. "We don't deserve the constant headaches, nosebleeds, and asthma attacks that we get on a day-to-day basis. We deserve to breathe clean air. We need a minimum 2,500 ft setback now."

#

VISION (Voices in Solidarity Against Oil in Neighborhoods) is a coalition of frontline, environmental justice, and public health and safety community groups focused on the impact of oil and gas extraction on communities in Kern and Los Angeles Counties. Learn more at www.vision-ca.org.