

Senate Bill 900

Coastal Oil Well Cleanup Act

Senator Jackson

SUMMARY

SB 900 will protect California's coastline by requiring the State Lands Commission to:

1. Remediate oil wells in California's coastal waters for which there are no responsible parties.
2. Remove coastal hazards, including wood and steel pilings, railroad irons, pipelines, wooden beams and structures, among other hazards.
3. Conduct an in-depth inventory of legacy oil wells along California's coastline.
4. Survey and monitor natural oil seepage in state waters, and determine possible mitigation measures.
5. Report to the Legislature on the effectiveness of these activities.

BACKGROUND

In the 1890s, the Summerland Oil Field in Santa Barbara County became the site of the world's first offshore oil drilling. The earliest wells pre-dated the creation of regulatory agencies and well record keeping. Since then the entire visual infrastructure of these old oil operations has been removed, but many—if not all—of the wells were not properly capped, causing fresh oil to foul the ocean and beaches on a regular basis. The Becker Onshore Well is one such well that was improperly abandoned. With no responsible party to re-abandon this well—all of the companies that operated these wells are long out of business—the responsibility to remediate this and other similar wells unfortunately falls on the state, which owns the land.

As a first step to mitigate the continual presence of oil at Summerland Beach, the State Lands Commission approved staff to do the initial inspection and assessment of the Becker Onshore Well at its August 2015 meeting. The goal was to secure subsequent funding to do the abandonment work. This is a laudable first step for this one particular well, but it is not enough. California needs a robust program to begin addressing all legacy oil wells in our coastal waters. The state should not ignore its obligation to mitigate this ongoing public health risk.

SOLUTION

The State Lands Commission has a demonstrated history of successfully re-abandoning legacy oil wells located in California's tidelands. The Commission also has a good record of remediating coastal hazards like wood and steel pilings, railroad irons, pipelines, and wooden beams and structures. Given the effectiveness of the Commission and its staff at protecting California's coastline, it is the appropriate agency to task with a program to remediate all of California's legacy oil wells and other coastal hazards.

We already know that there are over 200 improperly capped wells in state waters. In order to completely address the issue of legacy coastal oil wells, SB 900 directs the Commission to conduct an in-depth inventory of legacy oil wells along California's coastline.

Finally, in the aftermath of the Refugio Oil Spill in May of 2015, we learned that the state does not have data on the amount of natural oil seepage in state waters. Natural seepage refers to oil or gas that escapes from underground reservoirs to the earth's surface or into the ocean. One famous example of terrestrial natural seepage is the La Brea Tar Pits, but the largest known oil seep—Coal Oil Point—is in the Santa Barbara Channel. Coal Oil Point leaks approximately 10 0-150 barrels of oil into the ocean every day, as well as roughly 100 hydrocarbon equivalents of natural gas. By studying and monitoring natural seepage, the Commission will be better suited to determine strategies to prevent as much natural seepage as possible.

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SUPPORT

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