

The Environmental Legacy of Santa Barbara Channel Oil Production – a Call for Action

by
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One of the more significant discussions missing from the politics and headlines about offshore oil is what to do about the aging oil-works that already dot the Santa Barbara Channel coastline. Much of the discussion, to date, has not focused on the life-cycle of offshore oil and gas activities. That needs to change, for in Goleta, we face the constant threat of a low probability – high impact explosion, release or spill of hydrogen sulfide laden oil and gas from an aging infrastructure.

The advent of oil operations in and around the Channel involved hundreds of derricks on Goleta's Ellwood Mesa and on many piers that jutted out from the coastal headlands into the waters of today's State Tidelands. Not much is known about the location of many of those near-shore undersea wells. Not much is known about the manner in which they were sealed and abandoned. Not much is known about their ownership or agreed upon about the present-day responsible parties of interest. What is known is that the reservoir that they once tapped into is now re-pressurizing and well-head leaks, as recent as year 2000, have occurred.

A short list of other concerns follows, for which dialogue, policies and concerted actions need attention and concerted solutions:

§ The State is hamstrung by leases it issued to the oil companies, during the 1960's, that are seemingly structured to run forever, or at least as long as the fields are economically productive. There are no end dates in sight.

§ There is an old, legal non-conforming oil and gas processing operation located in a recreational resort area and located immediately next to a significant tidal-creek estuary and nearby residential neighborhoods.

§ There are many orphaned pipelines, motors, encased sumps, well housings, metal straps, bulkworks and pier pilings that rise from the beach sands and coastal headlands.

Ready solutions are far and between relative to the lease transactions, mineral and property rights, and zoning powers and authorities. But these are the next set of public policy concerns that deserve our heightened attention.

Note: The Assembly Environmental Safety and Toxic Materials Committee will be hold an oversight hearing on State and local actions to address the environmental hazards left from oil production on Santa Barbara beaches and offshore on Thursday, September 30 from 1 PM to 4 PM at the Goleta City Council Chambers.