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Massive Central Coast Drilling Plan Advances with More Than 175,000 Comments in Opposition

Central Coast, CA — March 20, 2026 — The public comment period has closed on the Bureau of Land Management’s proposal to expand oil and gas leasing across Central California, drawing approximately 175,000 comments in opposition from community members, organizations, and local stakeholders.

The proposal would open up [roughly 850,000 acres of public lands and federal mineral estate](#) to potential oil drilling and fracking across Santa Barbara, Ventura, San Luis Obispo, Kern, and surrounding counties, including areas near neighborhoods, recreation lands, and critical water resources.

In addition to widespread public input, [50 organizations from across the Central Coast region](#) submitted a joint letter urging the agency to revise the proposal and address neglected concerns related to public health, water resources, wildlife habitat, and land use conflicts. Earthjustice submitted [technical comments](#) to the BLM on behalf of the Center for Biological Diversity, Central California Environmental Justice Network, Los Padres ForestWatch, National Parks Conservation Association, Sierra Club, The Wilderness Society, CalWild, Environmental Defense Center, Friends of the Earth, and Natural Resources Defense Council.

Conservation groups note that the proposal relies on an environmental analysis developed between 2008 and 2012, now well over a decade old. They point out that this analysis was originally intended to guide development for just 10 years, a timeframe that has now long since passed.

Referring to the analysis, Benjamin Pitterle, Director of Advocacy at Los Padres ForestWatch, said, “These studies are supposed to be more than paperwork and rubber stamps. This plan puts some of the Central Coast’s most treasured public lands, beaches, communities, and drinking water sources at risk, yet it ignores new evidence and directly

conflicts with new state law. The BLM should go back to the drawing board. The public deserves better.”

Los Padres ForestWatch maintains an [interactive online map](#) and [list](#) highlighting lands affected by the proposed oil and gas leasing plan.

Local concern has continued to grow throughout the comment period. Earlier this month, Los Padres ForestWatch and Climate First: Replacing Oil & Gas (CFROG) hosted a community gathering at Harmon Canyon Preserve in Ventura County, to highlight how proposed leasing could affect communities and lands close to home.

“This proposal is a direct attack on the health of our communities, our beloved public lands, and our region at large. More than 175,000 comments from people across California were submitted in opposition to this expansion and insufficient environmental review,” Haley Ehlers, Executive Director at CFROG stated. “Just a few miles away from proposed leasing areas, dozens of Ventura County residents came together, shared why public lands are important to them, and how fossil fuel pollution has impacted their lives. Acts of resistance like this happened across the state.”

The proposal has similarly drawn strong concern from state officials. California Attorney General Rob Bonta recently [submitted formal objections](#), calling the analysis inadequate and warning about worsening pollution in already overburdened regions.

This proposal is the latest chapter in a long-running and contested federal effort to expand oil and gas development in the region, one that has repeatedly been sent back for additional environmental review. Yet despite years of [litigation](#), updated science, and major policy changes, the current plan still carries forward many of the same flaws. Most notably, it would allow new leasing across nearly 40,000 acres within California’s recently-established Health Protection Zones, including areas near communities in Lompoc, Oxnard, Fillmore, and New Cuyama, where state law prohibits new drilling near homes, schools, and other sensitive locations where health impacts are elevated.

Conservation groups say the plan fails to account for California’s shift away from fossil fuels, including the phase-out of fracking, the establishment of health-based setbacks, and expanded local authority to restrict oil and gas development. They additionally argue the proposal continues to rely on broad assumptions and deferred future analysis to address impacts to water supplies, wildlife habitat, and community health.

The areas identified for potential leasing include landscapes that Central Coast communities have long worked to protect, including federal mineral estate underlying portions of Montaña de Oro State Park, large coastal areas near Vandenberg Space Force Base, and inland regions such as the Cuyama Valley, the Sisquoc River watershed, and recreation areas surrounding Lake Cachuma and Los Padres National Forest.

With the close of the comment period, the Bureau of Land Management will review public input before making a final decision in July.

Los Padres ForestWatch and its partners emphasize that the agency now has a clear record of public opposition and a responsibility to address deficiencies before moving forward.

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About Los Padres ForestWatch

Los Padres ForestWatch is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that protects wildlife, water, wilderness, and sustainable access throughout Los Padres National Forest and Carrizo Plain National Monument through advocacy, education, and community engagement. Follow ForestWatch on [Instagram](#), [Facebook](#), [LinkedIn](#), and [Bluesky](#). Learn more at forestwatch.org.