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Minority Children More Likely to Attend School Near Fracking, Face Higher Risk of Health Impacts – New Report

BAKERSFIELD, Calif. – A new analysis released today on the distribution of California oil and gas wells in relation the state’s public schools finds that minority children are at a much greater risk of health problems related to fracking and other methods of oil drilling than white children.

A mapping of active wells and school demographics revealed one elementary school that sits within less than half a mile from three oil and gas wells where fracking is used. The school’s student population is 86 percent Latino. The analysis by the FracTracker Alliance provides yet another reason for Gov. Jerry Brown to ban fracking and other unconventional and dangerous oil drilling methods.

In all, nearly 353,000 students in California attend public schools within one mile or less of an oil or gas well, including 217 stimulated wells – or those in which fracking, acidizing and gravel-packing are used for extraction. Of those students, 79.6 percent are racial minorities, and 60.3 percent are Latino.

“The wellbeing of all Californians, but particularly our most vulnerable populations, should be foremost on Gov. Brown’s agenda. Our children should not be subjected to harmful pollutants that could hinder their development, especially when they are supposed to safe and protected at school. On top of that, there is an apparent disparity in the development of oil and gas resources near schools with predominantly Latino and African American school districts,” said Madeline Stano, a staff attorney at the Center for Race, Poverty and the Environment and a member of Californians Against Fracking.

Rodrigo Romo’s daughter was a student at Sequoia Elementary School in Shafter, Calif. Shafter is located in the heart of the San Joaquin Valley, where the eleven school districts with the highest oil and gas well counts in California are located.

“Today, those that represent us in public office, have to start caring more for our children's health. My children’s health. Not everything is about money,” said Rodrigo Romo, who is a member of the local Committee for a Better Shafter and serves as co-director of the city’s community garden.

A growing number of scientific studies have detailed the health and safety impacts of fracking on people, including children. Recent research in Pennsylvania shows increased incidences of skin

rashes and respiratory problems for residents living close to hydraulic fracturing operations. Researchers in Colorado have found an increased risk of health issues resulting from degraded air quality, as well as increased incidence of birth defects, for those living within half a mile of a gas well.

“This report is yet another alarming reminder of the hazards of fracking and other unconventional well stimulation methods,” said Lucinda Wasson, longtime Kern County resident and former head of nursing at Kern County Public Health Services. “In Kern County, which already has some of the worst air quality in the country, Latino children are more exposed because drilling is happening near their schools. Until the health and environmental effects of unconventional drilling are fully understood, Gov. Brown should declare a moratorium to protect our children and the general public.”

Studies by the U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry have found oil and gas operations result in a wide range of contaminants entering the air supply, including elevated levels of carcinogens near hydraulic fracturing operations. Children are most vulnerable to these contaminants. The same amount of contaminant can result in a higher internal dose in a child’s body than in an adult’s, affecting growth and neurological development.

California does not have regulations in place to protect the health of children attending schools from industrial activities, including oil and gas operations. State law does not limit how close to schools industry can place unconventional oil wells. The law does not require industrial operators to notify parents or school officials of nearby extraction sites, nor does it provide an opportunity for public participation in the process of approving new wells.

The analysis comes shortly after two California counties – San Benito and Mendocino – approved bans on fracking and other unconventional extraction methods, citing concerns for public health and protection of the state’s air and water resources.

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Californians Against Fracking is a coalition of about 200 environmental business, health, agriculture, labor, political and environmental justice organizations working to win a statewide ban on fracking and other extreme extraction techniques in California. Follow @CAagainstFrack on Twitter.