

Environment

Governor Newsom Signs Get-Tough-on-Oil Bill Introduced by Santa Barbara's Gregg Hart

Assembly Bill 631 to Increase Penalties and Enforcement Options for State and Local Governments When Confronting Scofflaw Oil Companies

By Nick Welsh
October 10, 2023

Governor Gavin Newsom signed a bill introduced by Santa Barbara's rookie Assemblymember Gregg Hart that would increase penalties and enforcement options for state and local governments when confronting oil companies for which existing sanctions are shrugged off as "a cost of doing business."

Hart's Assembly Bill 631 would empower local enforcement agencies to order operations immediately shut down for oil companies with chronic compliance issues. In addition, the bill would allow the state's chief enforcement agency – the California Geologic Energy Management Division (CalGEM) – to refer complaints to local prosecutors for action. In addition, the bill empowers CalGEM to initiate the necessary cleanup and abatement work on its own, billing the offending oil company for the work.



Gregg Hart's newly passed bill would have helped Santa Barbara County rein in the chronic environmental transgressions caused by the oil company formerly known as Greka.

Hart's chief of staff, Jimmy Wittrock, cited new reporting conducted by ProPublica showing that between 2018 and 2020, only 11 of the 66 enforcement actions undertaken by this agency were complied with. Of the \$190,000 in penalties imposed by this agency in 2020, not one dollar was ever paid.

According to testimony submitted to the Assembly Judiciary Committee, the new bill would have helped Santa Barbara County rein in the chronic environmental transgressions caused by the oil company formerly known as Greka. That company was responsible for more than 400 waste leaks at its North County facilities, but CalGEM lacked the authority to issue a cease-and-desist order on the company, thus shutting operations down. AB 631 would change that. Eventually – after more than 10 years – the company would be fined more than \$12 million, but by then, Greka had declared bankruptcy.

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