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Neighborhood Oil Drilling and Environmental Justice in Los Angeles

Bhavna Shamasunder

The Los Angeles Basin contains one of the highest concentrations of crude oil in the world, with over five thousand active oil wells in Los Angeles County.¹ Oil development in this region began in the 1890s and reached its peak in the 1930s, making up nearly half of California's oil production at the time and nearly one-quarter of the world's oil output.² Urban and suburban development grew alongside active oil production. Oil development is both ubiquitous and invisible in the city of Los Angeles, which has the largest urban oil field in the country and over one thousand oil wells. While many Angelenos are surprised today to learn of the extent of oil development in their region, this obfuscation is the result of specific and often uneasy historical and regulatory compromises. Since the 1890s, after oil was first discovered, residents fought for a share in oil-driven prosperity but bristled at the pollution and environmental destruction caused by oil drilling. Efforts to assert local control over drilling faltered against state, federal, and corporate measures to maintain economic and political control over oil resources.³ The legacy of decision making over oil drilling is that thousands of active wells in the greater Los Angeles area today are located among a dense population of more than ten million people. Moreover, 70 percent of active oil wells in the city are located within 1,500 feet of a home or sensitive land use such as a school, playground, or hospital, places where people live, work, and play.⁴

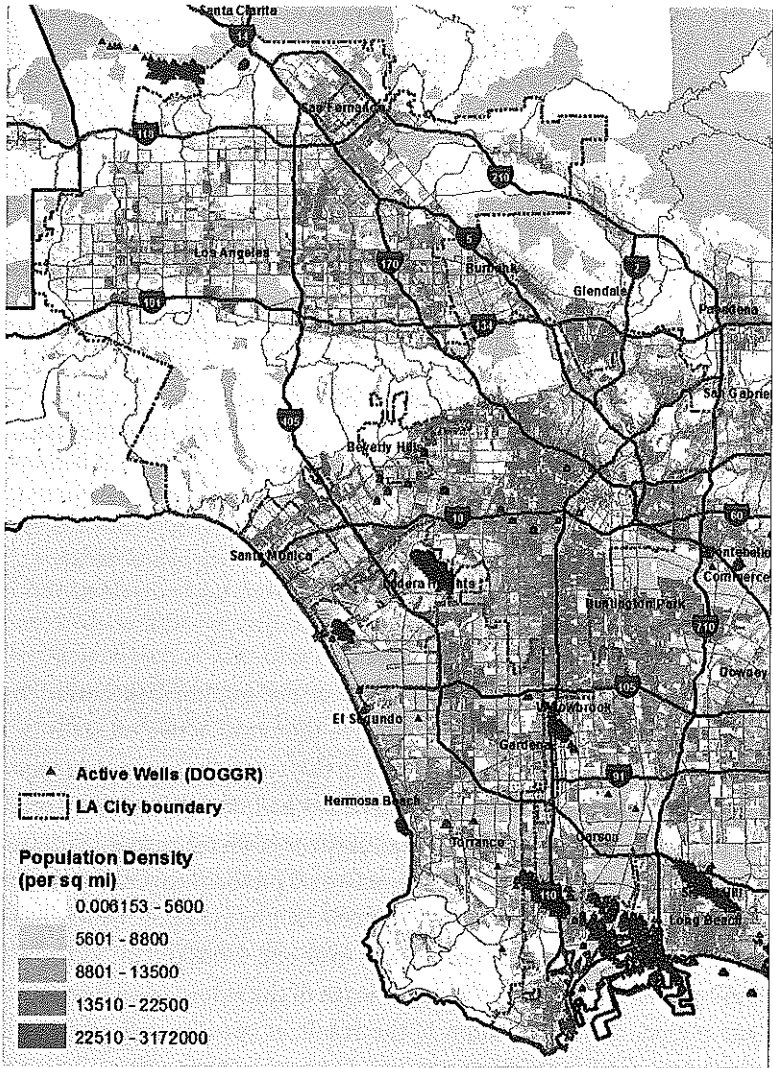


Figure 8.1. Active oil wells in Los Angeles County and their relationship to population density. Map courtesy of Dr. James Sadd and Liberty Hill Foundation.

Oil wells are scattered across the city and county, but in poor communities and communities of color, the distance between wells and their neighbors is closer than in wealthier and whiter neighborhoods. These communities are further exposed to contamination via outdated emissions equipment and uncovered rather than enclosed fields.⁵ Narrow definitions

of environmental injustice as distributional harm distort struggles between frontline environmental justice communities and government and regulatory officials over oil drilling.

In 2015 the California Council on Science and Technology conducted an independent scientific assessment of well stimulation in California. They concluded that “while it is clear that oil and gas is being developed in low-income communities and communities of color, there does not appear to be a disproportionate burden of oil and gas development on any one demographic in the Los Angeles Basin. In other words, oil and gas wells are not located disproportionately near the rich, the poor, or any race/ethnicity more than any other.”⁶ With this framing by scientific and regulatory authorities, race and poverty do not explain the presence of oil wells, the operations of oil fields, or the long-standing government and regulatory neglect of oil-adjacent communities of color.⁷

The South Los Angeles neighborhood of West Adams is a case in point. There, the Jefferson oil field well is located just three feet away from the nearest home, and the field itself constitutes a complex of more than sixty active oil wells. For members of this primarily Black and Latinx South Los Angeles neighborhood, where over 60 percent of residents live below the poverty line, information about the oil field, its ongoing operations, and on-site hazards are hard to obtain. Chemicals trucked into the closed compounds are shrouded in claims of trade secrecy, and it takes constant effort by community residents to learn about plans and activities at the field.⁸ Despite hard-won changes to regulation that require notice by oil companies to the local air district seventy-two hours in advance of any type of oil development activity, such as well drilling or maintenance, residents most often learn of toxic activity when their health is directly impacted and they suffer nosebleeds, headaches, or worsened asthma.⁹ West Adams residents have filed a petition for nuisance abatement to enclose the oil field and afford them the same protections found in wealthier neighborhoods.¹⁰ Such disparities in the enforcement and regulation of oil industry operations have prompted oil field-adjacent communities such as those in South Los Angeles to raise a number of questions about systemic environmental injustice by city and county agencies.¹¹ Certainly, the proximate distances of oil development to dense urban populations make Los Angeles a prime case for examining contested expertise in a toxic environment.

The more recent introduction of hydraulic fracturing and other unconventional technologies exacerbates ongoing issues from conventional oil

drilling. During the second Bush administration, Congress gave fracking and related technologies special exemptions from federal laws such as the Clean Water Act and the Safe Drinking Water Act, and devolved authority over these protections to the states. The 2005 Energy Policy Act affirmed that states, rather than the federal government, had jurisdiction over the oil and gas industry.¹² Local decision-making authority can be preempted by state laws that can hinder local action. Further, communities are often unclear as to where authority lies. For example, noise or smell pollution is reportable to the South Coast Air Quality Management District, while the Los Angeles County Department of Public Health can intervene at the time when a community experiences health impacts from pollution. But these agencies do not often work in coordination. This fragmented regulatory landscape further dampens progress on environmental justice. As a result, and despite acknowledgment by state and local governments that poor communities of color are disproportionately and cumulatively burdened by hazardous industries, patterns of racial injustice remain in place.

In this chapter, I situate oil drilling in Los Angeles in the context of long-standing fights for environmental justice, both as a social movement and a policy concern, and examine how environmental justice communities in Los Angeles have responded to increases in urban drilling since 2010. I first contextualize oil production in the Los Angeles region during the early twentieth century, during which discoveries of several oil-rich fields led to rampant overproduction. The resulting environmental degradation from uncontrolled oil development prompted early social movements in the 1920s that contested unregulated drilling and sought to restrict drilling practices.¹³ I then turn to the more contemporary landscape of oil development with the arrival of unconventional technologies in Los Angeles (e.g., hydraulic fracturing, i.e., “fracking” or acidizing, the related technology more commonly used in Los Angeles). While conventional drilling is a one-hundred-year-old practice in Los Angeles, the use of new technologies combined with the national wave of anti-fracking activism in the early 2000s set the stage for the emergence in 2014 of an organized coalition of front-line environmental justice groups—constituted through STAND-L.A. (Stand Together against Neighborhood Drilling)—to respond to these developments. I argue that efforts to achieve environmentally just policies and community protections at the local level have historically been stymied by minimal regulation of the oil industry at local, state, and national levels, although local activism against neighborhood oil drilling did flourish in

the 1920s and 1930s. Today's organizing by frontline communities against pollution by neighborhood oil fields can be considered a "second wave" of local opposition to oil industry practices, separated by a nearly sixty-five-year gap during which the oil industry set deep roots, built a strong lobby, and expanded in neighborhoods across the Southland.

EARLY DRILLING AND FIGHTS FOR LOCAL CONTROL

The oil industry has been central to the economic, political, and spatial development of California. The struggle over property rights and regulation of oil in the early twentieth century shaped how oil drilling is managed today. Oil extraction, transport, and sales are a mix of jurisdictional authority that was negotiated through the courts, legislatures, state policy, and economic interests. The discovery of oil across California in the 1890s prompted a rush to develop common oil pool resources and, subsequently, to fights over property rights among state, federal, and private entities. The laws governing oil followed the "right of capture," whereby individuals could only claim ownership by pulling oil from the ground, leading to a rush for rapid extraction that destabilized oil markets. State and federal governments jockeyed for jurisdiction over oil revenues alongside other economic interests, and there ensued a constant political struggle in the first half of the twentieth century over local and federal petroleum policy and property rights. From the 1920s through World War II, politicians and industry sought to contain oil overproduction, a consequence of the rush to develop huge pools of discovered oil, and in so doing to stabilize oil prices and more efficiently develop petroleum reserves.¹⁴ In the resulting compromises, California retained latitude to influence patterns of economic development and environmental change related to oil development at the state level, but national policies such as tax incentives for oil drilling constrained the state's options.¹⁵ At the local level, conflicts over oil pitted those who asserted property rights as central against those who sought protection from the ill effects of drilling. Meanwhile, the oil industry funded public parks and other voluntary efforts that aimed to marshal public support and deflect efforts at regulatory control. Thus, for more than one hundred years, oil drilling proceeded in Los Angeles with few regulatory constraints.¹⁶

A political economy of oil dictated California's regulatory landscape over a range of issues (e.g., transportation policy, property rights over subsurface

resources); however, a discussion of the ways in which the state and the oil industry interfaced with national policy is beyond the scope of this chapter.¹⁷ Local response to rampant oil production has been described in Los Angeles's beach cities, but fewer accounts exist in the interior communities where today's frontline struggles are centered.¹⁸ Nancy Quam-Wickham describes one of the few accounts of the response to oil drilling in Los Angeles's working-class suburbs. She finds that local politics diverged from state and federal policies, particularly in the urban environment of Los Angeles, arguing that the environmental degradation that followed on the heels of oil extraction led to early working-class mobilizations to restrict drilling in neighborhoods.¹⁹

In Los Angeles, the first oil wells were opened in the 1890s, and their presence dictated land use patterns, encouraged side-by-side industrialization and suburbanization, and propelled rampant real estate speculation. In 1913 Los Angeles produced 14 percent of California's oil. After World War I, the discovery of numerous oil fields in the Los Angeles Basin led to further surges in oil development. By 1924 Los Angeles accounted for 80 percent of the state's oil production at 872,000 barrels per day, and the region dominated state oil production through the 1920s and 1930s.²⁰ As in the rest of California, Los Angeles faced overproduction, and with unplanned and widespread extraction came extensive oil pollution. Pipelines leaked, ships dumped oil-contaminated water into public waterways, waste oil clogged the Los Angeles harbor, and beachgoers routinely coped with oily tar on beaches. Terrible pollution led to intense local and largely suburban opposition from those who lived and worked near oil production sites.²¹ Residents worked with local city authorities to pursue strategies for local control and to improve the surrounding environment. Local efforts were initially successful at slowing the pace of oil development, particularly in blue-collar Southland communities. Led by unions, communities such as Lomita, Hawthorne, and Torrance worked to pass prohibitions. Residents had first celebrated newfound oil because of jobs, but soon concerns arose over public health, street damage from heavy equipment, water table reduction, and fire protection, issues chronicled by residents in public meetings. In the working-class suburb of Hawthorne, incorporation papers prohibited oil development within city boundaries.²² Unions and elected leaders worked to rezone neighborhoods and held referendums to ban oil drilling within city limits. In the city of Torrance, a ban on oil drilling in the city's residential and business districts was approved in 1923.²³

Local victories such as these turned out to be short lived and rarely re-

sulted in longer-term reforms at the state or federal levels, particularly as the industry lobby found ways to circumvent local authority and appeal directly to state officials. However, these local political struggles did slow oil development and left a legacy of “an intensely local political culture throughout suburban Los Angeles, a culture that revolved around debates over the pace and character of industrial development in the region.”²⁴ To push back against local regulatory victories, the oil industry at this time forged deep political ties and developed a forceful lobby that successfully moved authority out of local jurisdictions. A previously divided industry now worked to remove local opposition and suppress working-class organizing efforts. In the decades that followed, the petroleum industry emerged as a leading sector in the California economy, producing one-quarter of the world’s oil by 1930 and reaching peak production of over 120,000 barrels per day in the 1980s.²⁵ In the aftermath of the first oil boom of the 1920s and 1930s, and following World War II, efforts to curb oil production were largely structured as a fight between competing economic interests—the tourism sector and the oil industry—rather than being linked to grassroots or working-class mobilizations.²⁶ “Growth machine” politics, a coalition of local business and local government, pursued a well-documented joint agenda of land use that dominated Los Angeles political culture after World War II. This political consensus largely took the place of local organizing efforts in curbing the landscape of oil production and played an important role in how the oil industry in Los Angeles looks today.²⁷

In the early part of the 1900s, Southern California beaches were largely privately held but undeveloped and open for recreational uses. Angelenos came to think of the beaches as their own. The drilling boom of the 1920s alarmed beachgoing Angelenos, and in the 1940s, conflict arose over the incompatible land uses of the shoreline. Advocates who fought to keep the shoreline free of drilling asserted beaches as public, noncommercial, and nonindustrial spaces. These efforts were championed primarily by planning associations, state governments that moved to purchase beach land, tourism business interests, and chambers of commerce, rather than the popular and grassroots working-class protests of the 1920s. Cities such as Santa Monica and Huntington Beach were generally successful in purchasing lands from private holders and reclaimed their shorelines for public access. But efforts to curb oil production had little traction outside of recreational policy.²⁸ The flip side of the success of recreation- and tourism-related victories over oil drilling was the inability to curb oil production in neighborhoods farther

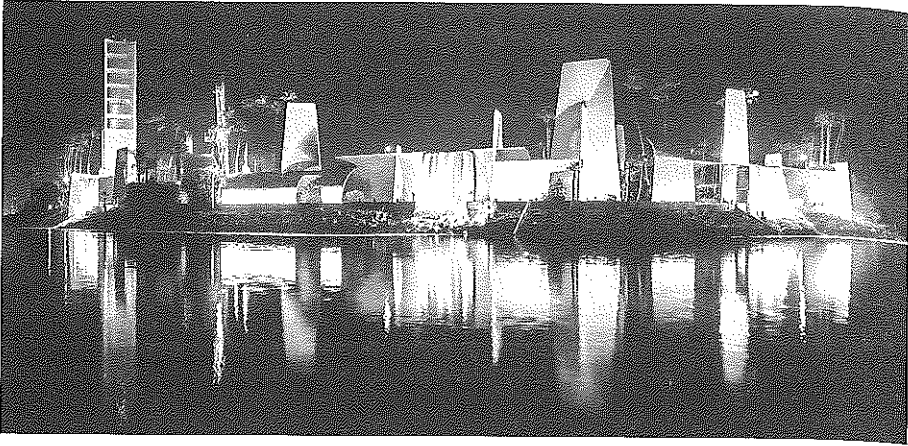


Figure 8.2. The THUMS Islands are a set of four artificial islands in San Pedro Bay off the coast of Long Beach, California. They were built in 1965 to tap into the East Wilmington Oil Field. The landscaping and sound walls were designed to camouflage the operation and reduce noise, and they are the only decorated oil islands in the United States. Photo courtesy of Adam Benwell.

from the shore. In the midst of World War II, federal authorities and the military effectively pressured Los Angeles to open the interior of the city and residential neighborhoods to drilling as a show of patriotism for the war effort.²⁹ Working-class neighborhoods that had fought the oil booms of the 1920s and that were increasingly home to low-income communities of color were opened to largely unregulated drilling, neighborhoods that would spur the environmental justice movement of the 1980s.³⁰

In the continued effort to curb regulatory oversight, the oil industry made massive investments in camouflage and beautification in both offshore and interior oil fields. These efforts were aimed at keeping oil activities from the attention of neighboring residents and government regulators as Los Angeles's population grew.³¹ Companies built tall hedges around wells and planted landscaped gardens in front of "no trespassing" gates. In Long Beach in 1965, oil companies hired a famed Disney theme park architect, Joseph H. Linesch, to design the \$10 million THUMS Islands. Named for the consortium of companies Texaco, Humble (now Exxon), Union, Mobil, and Shell, THUMS embodied the "aesthetic mitigation of technology."³² The complex is a set of four artificial islands built to camouflage drill rigs with landscaping, waterfalls, and tall structures, and its purpose is to hide

from view forty-two acres of oil fields and 1,100 wells in a vast underground oil field.³³ By the late 1980s and 1990s, as the price of oil dropped and local property values rose, many oil wells around Los Angeles were capped and oil production fell.³⁴

UNCONVENTIONAL DRILLING TECHNOLOGIES IN THE EARLY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Through the 1990s and the early 2000s, though oil prices and production decreased, drilling continued. Over this time period, and in the absence of any unified oppositional social movement, sustained public attention to the oil industry was generally lacking. The *Los Angeles Times* reports on oil drilling as occasional, accidental, and isolated local incidents rather than as part of the structural fabric on which the city was built. Accidents from oil drilling came to be seen as unanticipated or surprising. One such event was the hydrogen sulfide leak underneath Belmont High School, built atop an oil field in downtown Los Angeles, in 1998. The leak was discovered before the school opened, but the district had already invested in the construction, seemingly taken off guard by the presence of oil-related gases. The issue dragged out for ten years as the school district was forced to close the hazardous site, reopening it in 2008 after installing a \$17 million gas mitigation system.³⁵ This period in Los Angeles history marks a departure from the earlier postwar period. Public activism shifted away from oil drilling as a focus, and oil companies worked toward a politics of invisibility.

While conventional oil-drilling practices in Los Angeles faced limited large-scale social resistance, a new unconventional drilling technology—hydraulic fracturing—began to draw attention nationally. Over the past two decades, United States energy policy encouraged the development of domestic energy sources to reduce America's dependence on foreign oil and advance energy independence.³⁶ As oil was depleted from conventional and more accessible geologic formations, the fossil fuel industry aggressively pursued "unconventional oil" deposits that were located in deeper, more difficult to recover deposits.³⁷ By the early 2000s, widespread use of hydraulic fracturing and related technologies such as acid fracturing made the recovery of hard-to-access deposits possible. "Fracking" shatters subterranean rocks by introducing liquids at high pressures to extract oil or gas. Most unconventional drilling aims to access natural gas within shale rock, which is

typically located at significant depths several miles below the surface. Large volumes of water or acid, sand, and chemical additives are injected at high pressure into horizontally drilled boreholes to break apart shale formations and release trapped gas.³⁸

The 2005 “Halliburton loophole” (named after the Texas energy company that invented the technology) exempts unconventional fossil fuel extraction from the nation’s major environmental protection laws, including the Clean Air Act, Clean Water Act, and the Safe Drinking Water Act, that were passed in the 1970s.³⁹ Since 2014, more than six hundred peer-reviewed studies have been published that investigate the environmental and public health consequences of natural gas development, with 84 percent of them finding public health hazards, elevated risks, or adverse health outcomes. In sum, unconventional oil-drilling practices are connected with exposure to benzene and other volatile organic compounds that are known carcinogens and reproductive toxins. Hydraulic fracturing is also significantly linked with groundwater contamination, elevated air pollution, and associated risks to human health.⁴⁰ Federal regulation of these practices is thus both lacking and lax, and has left impacted communities at the local level, including those in Los Angeles, to largely fend for themselves.

By 2009 the use of horizontal drilling technologies (i.e., acid fracking) in Los Angeles neighborhoods revived local concerns over oil drilling. The national wave of anti-fracking activism arrived in Los Angeles by 2010 and with it the presence of national environmental groups that had earlier fought fracking in New York. Groups such as Food and Water Watch formed initial connections with local neighborhoods over drilling, but these alliances quickly frayed as their interests diverged. Neighborhood groups, particularly environmental justice communities, bristled with what they saw as large national environmental organizations deprioritizing local concerns over public health, lax regulatory enforcement, and entrenched environmental injustice related to oil drilling over cries to “ban fracking now.” The following section chronicles what can be considered a “second wave” of local, working-class, and neighborhood activism in Los Angeles that has not existed since the 1920s. This new movement is informed by and integrated with the environmental justice movement that emerged in the 1980s, a movement that advanced an understanding of racial patterns of injustice and disproportionate exposures to pollution and other environmental hazards in poor communities of color.⁴¹

ANTI-DRILLING ACTIVISM AND ENVIRONMENTAL JUSTICE IN LOS ANGELES

In Los Angeles, unconventional oil extraction methods such as “acidizing” (where corrosive acids are used instead of water as a fracturing fluid) and “directional drilling” (where a well is vertically drilled thousands of feet below the surface and then directionally, horizontally or at an angle, for up to two miles) ushered in renewed investment into old and idle wells.⁴² New wells have been drilled or redrilled under the auspices of old permits that were granted by the city of Los Angeles in the 1960s. Moreover, oil fields in South Los Angeles and many other sites across the city predate major environmental legislation enacted in the 1970s, such as the Clean Air Act, the Clean Water Act, and the California Environmental Quality Act, which requires an Environmental Impact Review.⁴³ Early drilling permits have thus been grandfathered, in some cases allowing the field owner to drill scores of additional wells under the original oil permits without any type of environmental review.

Horizontal or directional underground drilling also enables companies to reach underneath urban residences and buildings and hides the magnitude of oil development in Los Angeles. On the street level, the oil company is hidden behind closed and often landscaped fences. The drilling begins behind this fence at a well pad where drilling spiders horizontally below the ground beneath homes, businesses, playgrounds, schools, and streets. For example, the Jefferson and Murphy oil fields in South Los Angeles are connected underground through a web of pipes that are invisible at the surface. As a result, residents are often unaware they live near or on top of an active drill site. The use of corrosive acids such as hydrochloric and hydrofluoric acid in acid fracturing further threatens public health. Oil companies bring corrosive acids through neighborhoods in trucks marked with cautionary warnings for hazardous chemicals and chemicals that have been linked with birth defects.⁴⁴ Chemical additives used in unconventional oil development and regular well maintenance have been identified as a toxicity risk with a lack of adequate evaluation of the hazard posed by their use.⁴⁵ In the West Adams neighborhood of South Los Angeles, residents can look over their backyard walls into the oil compound and see workers wearing hazmat suits, while they themselves have no protection.

By 2010 residents of South Los Angeles started to notice and report

odors, nosebleeds, and headaches, and began to loosely connect with other communities in Los Angeles also reporting similar issues.⁴⁶ During this period, national anti-fracking activism brought mainstream environmental organizations into the fray of local and state politics. In December 2014, Governor Andrew Cuomo signed legislation to ban fracking in New York State.⁴⁷ In the wake of this victory, Food and Water Watch brought their campaign to Los Angeles, with slogans such as “Don’t Frack California.” However, this framing slighted working-class neighborhoods and environmental justice communities that had differences in strategy, ideology, and proposed solutions.

The clash between mainstream environmental organizations and environmental justice groups is long-standing. The largest mainstream environmental organizations known as the Big 10 (e.g., the Sierra Club, Natural Resources Defense Council, and Environmental Defense Fund) were founded with goals of wilderness preservation and conservation of natural resources. Following World War II, groups that grew as a response to the rise of industrialization, such as the Sierra Club, turned to preserving places that were increasingly under threat from resource use, such as Yosemite Valley.⁴⁸ In the 1960s, Rachel Carson’s book *Silent Spring*, written about the harms of DDT to wildlife, ushered in the modern-day environmentalism that was concerned with the widespread use of pesticides and the impacts of chemicals on the environment.⁴⁹ The mainstream environmental movement was largely spearheaded by white activists. By contrast, the environmental justice movement has its roots in the civil rights organizing of the 1960s and is characterized by grassroots organizing by communities of color. Starting in the 1980s, environmental justice communities publicized fights against hazardous waste landfills and toxic waste dumping in their urban neighborhoods, and forwarded a theoretical framework describing distributional injustice—that environmental harms were disproportionately located in poor communities and communities of color.⁵⁰ Environmental justice communities argued that mainstream environmentalism had neglected where people “live, work, and play,” and in particular had abandoned environmental problems in the urban core. Today, mainstream environmental groups continue to be better funded and often lack voices of communities of color in their ranks.⁵¹ The friction between environmental justice and mainstream environmental groups remains, though there have been some important strides to patch tensions and work together to find common ground.⁵²

In the mid-1980s, Los Angeles became an epicenter for environmental

justice organizing. The Mothers of East Los Angeles formed to fight the proposed construction of a state prison, and residents of Wilmington organized against the pollution emitted by the Phillips 66 oil refinery, with support from Communities for a Better Environment.⁵³ These early struggles were important in highlighting health and safety hazards of living near oil refineries, and they framed oil development as an environmental justice problem, with communities of color facing a disproportionate burden of harm from a widely used resource. In subsequent decades, the environmental justice movement deepened and expanded the framework of environmental injustice to include ongoing issues such as enforcement disparities and cumulative burdens of harm.⁵⁴ Through the various efforts of environmental justice leaders, in 2002 California became one of the first states to acknowledge the role of government agencies in alleviating environmental injustice. After a decade of research, the California Environmental Protection Agency published CalEnviroScreen, which ranks communities according to economic, social, and environmental vulnerability.⁵⁵ Low-income neighborhoods with active oil development, such as South Los Angeles and Wilmington, are thus identified as communities that face some of the highest burdens of pollution and are recognized by state agencies as “environmental justice communities.” In practice, this identification supports efforts to deter new hazardous industries from entering communities and aims to help target investment into these neighborhoods.⁵⁶ Yet, as already noted, oil drilling and existing oil fields continue to be exempted from many major environmental laws, making the effort of environmental justice communities to seek public health protections an ongoing challenge.

The tensions between more recent mainstream anti-fracking activism and the decades-long struggle of low-income and minority communities suffering from exposure to undesirable land uses in Los Angeles were epitomized in the effort of city officials to oppose unconventional drilling practices. In February 2014, Los Angeles City Council members Mike Bonin and Paul Koretz, who represent districts on the wealthier west side and beach cities of Los Angeles, took up a fracking moratorium championed by Food and Water Watch and Los Angeles Waterkeeper, two national mainstream environmental organizations. Food and Water Watch brought the campaign “Ban Fracking in California” to Los Angeles, with the main problems described as water pollution, air pollution, and earthquake and property damage.⁵⁷ It was a broad agenda that lacked local specificity. In championing the ban with city leaders, Food and Water Watch and Water-

keeper made no mention of health impacts to communities living near oil wells, well proximity to houses, lack of regulation, or the incompatible land uses in neighborhoods already burdened by many other sources of toxic pollution—the core concerns of frontline environmental justice groups. The city council voted to send the moratorium to the city attorney’s office and the city planning department to be written as a zoning ordinance. Following the vote, Bonin tweeted: “Los Angeles just became the largest city in the nation to support a moratorium on fracking & other dangerous drilling.”⁵⁸ But by November 2014, the city planning department released a sixty-seven-page report in which the deputy director of planning in the city of Los Angeles, Alan Bell, stated that there were no qualified city staff with expertise in petroleum and natural gas engineering and geology who could work with the planning department to implement the moratorium.⁵⁹ The planning department was hesitant to move forward and suggested the city take a different route. Bell argued that federal, state, and county rules would supersede any city restrictions on unconventional drilling. He noted that “the oil industry has argued that local jurisdictions have no authority to regulate how oil and gas extraction occurs. This issue is the subject of pending litigation in *Western States Petroleum Association v. City of Compton et al.* (LASC Case No. BC552272). The lawsuit is in response to an ordinance passed in Compton prohibiting hydraulic fracturing, acidizing, and other well stimulation activities. It is unlikely that this legal issue will be resolved anytime soon. On September 24, 2014, the City Council of Compton rescinded the moratorium at the City Attorney’s recommendation.”⁶⁰

Indeed, in April 2014, the predominantly African American and Latinx city of Compton in Los Angeles County had passed an ordinance to ban new drilling within their city borders. City officials sought to prevent underground drilling operations that could drill into the city from outside the city limits. These drills could access oil deposits located beneath the city’s boundaries. The Western States Petroleum Association sued Compton and rightly claimed that the local ban was unconstitutional and preempted by state regulation. The association argued that Compton could not control drilling into their city that originated outside of its borders. Under the threat of an extended legal battle, the Compton city government was forced to drop the ordinance.⁶¹ Given the historic loss of local jurisdictions to regulate oil field development, the neighboring city of Carson soon backed out of a similar moratorium effort. Ultimately, Los Angeles, too, dropped its fracking moratorium.⁶²

In this scenario, environmental justice organizations viewed national environmental groups as alienating frontline communities by promoting an agenda that did not include long-standing local concerns over public health from undesirable and incompatible land uses. Moreover, many frontline neighborhood groups understood the attempt of the Los Angeles city fracking moratorium as shortsighted, vulnerable to oil industry pressure, and limited in terms of securing long-term public health protections for environmental justice communities because it did not cover existing conventional drilling operations that continue unabated in neighborhoods.⁶³ Communities in South Los Angeles and Wilmington, which house the majority of active wells in Los Angeles, instead sought reforms that would ensure public health protections from all oil development activities, address proximity of drilling to neighborhoods, improve lax regulatory enforcement, incorporate recognition of cumulative harm, and afford communities basic public health protections through zoning changes, protective buffers, and setbacks from active oil fields. The importance of framing oil drilling in low-income communities of color as a public health issue pushed already-connected frontline groups to form the coalition STAND-L.A., which had until then been a set of loosely organized groups.

SETTING BOUNDARIES AND BUILDING ALLIANCES

In early 2014, frontline communities began meeting to share strategies. Local groups sought to clearly define their organizing agenda by creating a joint mission and vision, and collectively defining the path forward. Since April 2014, Redeemer Community Partnership, Esperanza Community Housing, Communities for a Better Environment, Physicians for Social Responsibility—Los Angeles, and Liberty Hill Foundation (which served as convener) had been meeting as the Oil Extraction Working Group. By January 2015, the working group had created a name (STAND-L.A.) and an organizational structure. The coalition created a concentric circle system. STAND-L.A. made decisions internally, and organizations with common concerns (e.g., the Sierra Club and other mainstream environmental groups) were invited to offer their support. This strategy engaged larger environmental organizations on broader issues related to oil development, such as climate change, but kept the coalition focused on frontline and neighborhood issues. In this way, STAND-L.A. sought to control the policy agenda and media framing

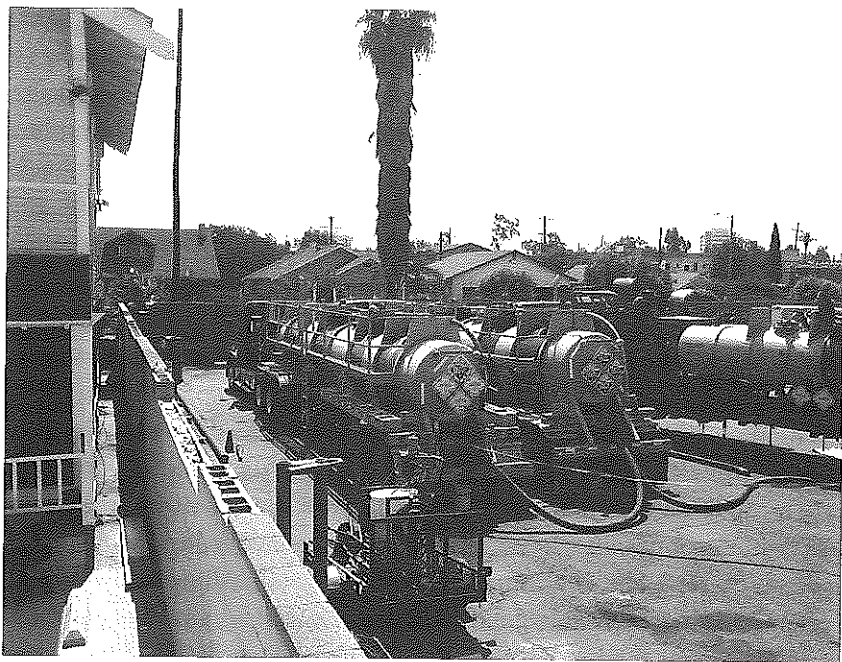


Figure 8.3. The Jefferson Drill Site, West Adams Neighborhood, South Los Angeles. Photo courtesy of Richard Parks.

to ensure that the issue of health and safety risks from oil development in working-class neighborhoods was at the forefront of organizing.⁶⁴

In November 2014, STAND-L.A. organized its first effort in support of one of its members, Redeemer Community Partnership, whose neighborhood sits adjacent to the Jefferson oil field. Freeport-McMoRan Oil and Gas, a multinational mining giant based in Phoenix, Arizona, and operator of the Jefferson oil field at that time, sought to drill and redrill three new wells at this site. That month, the South Coast Air Quality Management District held a public meeting to discuss this issue. Over 150 residents and activists attended the meeting, and by January 2015, in the face of overwhelming opposition, Freeport-McMoRan withdrew its application. This was an early and important victory to protect community health. The Los Angeles planning department, however, could not impose any conditions on Freeport-McMoRan's existing operations, an issue that continues to be a struggle for communities given the aforementioned grandfathered permits.

The following year, in November 2015, Communities for a Better Environment, with a coalition of youth in member organizations of STAND-

L.A., sued the city of Los Angeles over racially discriminatory oil-drilling permitting. The suit, filed in Los Angeles County Superior Court, accused the city of systematically violating the California Environmental Quality Act by exempting new wells and other proposed changes in oil extraction sites from required environmental review. The lawsuit called out the pattern of racial injustice, with Black and Latinx communities disproportionately placed in harm's way. The suit argued that more stringent conditions, including taller walls, better sound protection, and greater pollution controls on equipment were required for drilling sites in West Los Angeles, a higher-income neighborhood, than in Wilmington or South Los Angeles. The suit sought to halt what communities see as a "pattern and practice" of approvals that result in unequal protection.⁶⁵ In response to the lawsuit and prior to settlement, the Los Angeles planning department implemented new procedures and guidelines to ensure that the city complies with the California Environmental Quality Act when permitting new oil wells. The city will not issue permits for oil drilling without public notice and a hearing, and will examine the project's health, safety, and environmental threats.⁶⁶ Following the settlement, a state-based oil and gas trade group, the California Independent Petroleum Association, sued both the youth and the city, arguing that they did not receive an appropriate opportunity to provide input into the new guidelines, which "unilaterally and improperly [override] state law."⁶⁷ This claim by the California Independent Petroleum Association draws from the long history of the oil industry seeking to remove oil regulation from local control. For environmental justice groups, this victory created an important direction for addressing future drilling in Los Angeles. STAND-L.A.'s organizing agenda has given local neighborhoods a voice in oil development for the first time since the 1920s and has highlighted how communities in noncoastal and working-class neighborhoods suffer from pollution and health consequences from living near oil and gas development operations.

The coalition's ongoing work has brought wider attention to neighborhood oil drilling and, from a grassroots and environmental justice perspective, has been able to rebuild bridges with broader social movements while keeping frontline agendas as their core struggle. They have forged partnerships with new allies such as Oscar-nominated actor Mark Ruffalo, who, after a neighborhood oil visit, penned the blog post "Why is L.A. Toxic?"⁶⁸ Neighborhood oil drilling was also a focal point of the "Break Free" fossil fuels march held in countries across the world, including the United States, the

UK, Australia, South Africa, and Indonesia over a two-week period in May 2016. Neighborhood oil activists from Los Angeles were profiled in international newspapers with a photo caption reading: "Activists oppose oil wells in immigrant neighborhoods."⁶⁹ These efforts demonstrate the connections that environmental justice organizations make with broader social movements on issues such as climate change, "keep it in the ground" organizing, 350.org, and fossil-free future efforts. But STAND-L.A. clearly frames their work as protecting community safety and public health in poor neighborhoods of color as their central concern and the driver of their policy agenda.

CONCLUSION

Residents in dense urban areas view neighborhood oil drilling as a safety hazard and a threat to their health and environment, a problem further magnified by extreme weather events and environmental catastrophes and crises. Frontline communities today, located in many of the same neighborhoods that fought against rampant extraction in the 1920s, have revived the intense culture of local political organizing that was suppressed by oil industry and growth machine politics that dominated Los Angeles after World War II. Bolstered by the legacy of environmental justice activism, interior communities near oil wells far from Los Angeles's beaches are primarily working-class communities of color that have cut their teeth on organizing against undesirable land uses since the 1980s. The tight-knit consensus of business and city leaders that dominated the past fifty years of growth in Los Angeles is also eroding, making space for local activism and environmental groups.⁷⁰ This convergence of factors creates an important space for the current upsurge in local activism against neighborhood oil drilling, epitomized by the work of STAND-L.A.

In this chapter, I argue that social movement activism and racialized histories have shaped the politics and landscape of oil extraction in the city of Los Angeles. Communities in the interior, without the protective arguments of beach recreation, became home to unregulated drilling after World War II. At the same time, these neighborhoods were increasingly racialized and segregated by land use and zoning practices of the 1950s and 1960s.⁷¹ The ongoing struggle to create safe and healthy communities in the shadow of the long history of oil development in Los Angeles might thus provide useful insights for impacted communities elsewhere.

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