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Public Comment - Sierra Club

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Real Climate Plans Don't Give Big Oil a Free Pass

Ventura and Los Angeles Count Oil Industry Pollution, Santa Barbara Does Not



By Katie Davis, Chair, Sierra Club Santa Barbara-Ventura Chapter

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Exxon/Sable's Santa Ynez Unit includes platforms Harmony, Hondo, and Heritage. Restarting the unit would add to the largest source of pollution in Santa Barbara County. | Credit: Glenn Baltz

Santa Barbara County's proposed [2030 Climate Action Plan](#) challenges the community to cut our emissions in half but leaves out the one industry most responsible for climate pollution in the county and the world — the oil and gas industry. Ventura and Los Angeles counties don't have this dirty loophole. Santa Barbara County supervisors should demand a fix when it's up for approval on August 27.

The goal itself is fine. Reducing greenhouse gas pollution 50 percent by 2030 (below 2018 levels) is in line with what the global community [agrees is necessary](#) to avoid the worst impacts of climate change. The problem lies in how the county is tallying pollution and measuring success at reaching the goal. Using twisted logic, they are leaving out the biggest polluters and contributors to the

problem — Exxon/Sable, Cat Canyon producers like HVI (previously Greka), and all other oil and gas facilities.

That makes the exercise unfair and untrue. It's unfair because all the rest of us are challenged to reduce emissions, while the oil industry is off the hook. And it's untrue because we need a neutral tally of all community greenhouse gas pollution so that we can accurately see how we're doing over time.

Nor is this a minor omission. If Exxon's facilities, shut down since the 2015 Refugio oil spill, but once one of our largest polluters, were turned back on, pollution would soar, even as the county could claim to be meeting climate goals.

It won't be easy to reduce pollution sufficiently, and it's much harder if we leave out the most polluting industry. A single oil operation could erase the work done to reduce carbon pollution by every other person, every home, every small business, every farm in the county. Even as we switch to electric tractors, ride our bikes to work, install solar on our schools, and purchase EVs and heat pumps, this one industry would be getting a free pass — their pollution not even counted.

In contrast, Ventura and Los Angeles counties do count oil industry pollution and are taking action to reduce it. Los Angeles is working toward phasing out oil drilling and Ventura County requires the use of "electrically powered equipment from 100 percent renewable sources" for oil and gas exploration and production and prohibits trucking oil and venting or flaring of gas if feasible. Ventura's regulations survived settlement with the oil industry.

So why not do the same here? To comply with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), the county must include measures to reduce sources of pollution they count. Rather than make this notoriously resistant industry play by the rules, they decided not to count oil industry pollution. However, CEQA requires we tally all pollution from all activities — not pick and choose and pretend that pollution is less than it really is.

Another rationale given by the county is that it lacks regulatory control over oil and gas facilities. However, the county has more control over the oil industry through its permitting authority than over other sources of pollution, such as our cars' tailpipes. If the plan was restricted to what the county directly controls, there would be virtually nothing to count.

The Climate Action Plan contains good measures that will ensure our transportation and buildings can be powered by renewable energy, that there is public charging for electric cars, more bike paths and affordable housing to reduce commute times. To the extent these reduce pollution from burning fossil fuels, it will contribute to California's goals to address climate change, which is driving record heat, wildfires, and other impacts. It will also save lives lost to air pollution that contributes to asthma, respiratory illness, heart disease, and cancer.

According to scientists, the next few years are critical ones for climate action. Local Climate Action Plans should be real ones that meaningfully contribute to California's goals, but that only works if we are transparent and honest about tallying emissions and don't give the most polluting industries a free pass.

That's why a growing coalition of environmental organizations are asking the county to close this dirty loophole. That coalition includes the Sierra Club, the Environmental Defense Center, the Community Environmental Council, CFROG, the Center for Biological Diversity, Food & Water Watch, CAUSE,

the Wishtoyo Chumash Foundation, SBCAN, the Clean Coalition, Los Padres ForestWatch, Citizens Climate Lobby, 350SB, among others.

Ask our Board of Supervisors to amend the Climate Action Plan to include emissions from the fossil-fuel industry. Email them at: sbcob@countyofsb.org.