News
EarthBeat



The Murphy Drill Site in the Jefferson Park neighborhood of Los Angeles. (Capital & Main/Faces of Fracking/Sarah Craig)

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Surrounded by apartment buildings and retirement homes, and less than 1,000 feet from three public schools, an active oil drill site is hidden just behind a green fence and a row of carefully manicured trees. Two gates on either end display signs identifying the Murphy Site, operated by E&B Natural Resources. The signs warn of cancer- and birth defect-causing chemicals, and the possible presence of hydrogen sulfide, an extremely flammable and toxic gas known for its pungent, "rotten egg" odor.

The Murphy Site, which taps the La Cienegas Oil Field, is located in Jefferson Park, a South L.A. neighborhood composed mostly of Black and Latino residents. Those living near the site display "significantly higher prevalence of wheezing, eye and nose irritation and dizziness" as well as reduced lung capacity, according to a 2021 study from the University of Southern California.

The site is not owned by an energy company, though, but by the Catholic Archdiocese of Los Angeles. That's why some religious activists have been calling on the archdiocese and the city to protect those at risk of exposure to dangerous chemicals by shutting down the site, which has been active since oil wells were first drilled in 1961 after an oil tycoon's daughter donated the property to the archdiocese. That years-long activism has culminated in a response from the city in late February that places sweeping restrictions on E&B Natural Resources' operations and represents a huge victory for public health advocates.

"Oil drill sites are fundamentally incompatible with residential neighborhoods," said Richard Parks, the president and founder of Redeemer Community Partnership, a Christian faith-centered nonprofit whose priorities include keeping South L.A. residents safe from the health effects of urban oil wells. "The Murphy Drill Site should have never been here, and it shouldn't be here now."

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E&B Natural Resources did not respond to requests for comment.

In 2019, Redeemer Community Partnership's advocacy helped lead to the closure of the Jefferson Drill Site in North University Park. More recently, alongside Holman United Methodist Church, RCP has been working to achieve similar results at the Murphy Site.

Unlike many oil drilling operations around the city, the Murphy Site is not enclosed by barrier walls, allowing toxic chemicals and emissions to spread out across the neighborhood. It also produces much of its own energy by burning methane gas, while sites in more strictly regulated areas, like the Hillcrest Country Club, have been using cleaner electrical power for decades.

Advocates like Parks say stricter environmental and health regulations are long overdue in marginalized neighborhoods like Jefferson Park.

"The city needs to extend to South L.A. the same protections it gave to wealthier, whiter, West L.A. neighborhoods more than 20 years ago," Parks said.

Some Jefferson Park residents suspect the health effects of the Murphy Site go beyond wheezing and reduced lung capacity. At a protest in late January, longtime resident the Rev. Helena Titus, whose childhood home lay within 500 feet of the operations, described just how much oil drilling had affected her life and neighborhood.

"When I would go to school, I would walk past the Murphy Site and there would be black smoke billowing out," Titus said. "My mother was diagnosed with non-Hodgkin's lymphoma, then my next door neighbor got it, and then I was diagnosed with it. How could this be? There are people suffering from diseases in our neighborhood at untold rates."

Though the neighborhood around the Murphy Site has not been studied, similar oil and gas developments have been shown to increase cancer rates in communities situated near those sites.



Richard Parks stands across the street from the Murphy Drill Site. (Capital & Main/Jeremy Lindenfeld)

E&B Natural Resources has been cited repeatedly by agencies as recently as last September for failing to comply with safety regulations at the operation. The South Coast Air Quality Management District issued two violations because the site is closer than 1,000 feet from three K-12 schools. The Los Angeles Fire Department issued violations for improperly reactivating or plugging abandoned wells. Failure to address those "idle wells" can lead to the poisoning of underground water sources and create a pathway for explosive and toxic hydrocarbons like methane to reach the surface. The California Geologic Energy Management Division alone has issued more than 20 notices of violation since 2020 for improperly installing pipes, grates, hatches and crucial labels.

To progressive Christians like Parks, the damage being dealt to residents is antithetical to the mission of the Catholic Church.

"I've reached out to the archdiocese and I've said, 'This is blood money that you're taking here,'" Parks said. "'Would you think about breaking this lease out of love for your South L.A. neighbors?'"

He said, "Their answer was no."

Contacted for comment, the archdiocese's director of media relations, Adrian Alarcon, said it is "committed to the safety and wellbeing of [its] communities." Alarcon said the archdiocese is "supportive of efforts to ensure that operations are conducted in accordance with all public safety and air quality regulations," but did not address whether the archdiocese would be open to ceasing the oil operations that have earned it millions of dollars in rent and production royalties.

"The archdiocese has an extractive theology," Parks said. "It would take a change of leadership and a profound change of heart to close the oil operations."

"When you know you are harming people, and you say, 'Sorry, we are making googobs of money over here,' that's malevolence," Titus said. "I don't know another definition of evil."



The Rev. Helena Titus stands on the corner of the street she grew up on. (Capital & Main/Jeremy Lindenfeld)

In December of 2022, the Los Angeles City Council unanimously approved an ordinance banning new oil and gas extractions and requiring existing operations to be phased out within 20 years. Activists applaud the move, but say that decades is too long to wait for those living in the shadow of oil wells.

"It's wonderful that the city has passed a phase out ordinance," Parks said. "But we don't believe that that absolves the city of its responsibility and duty to protect the health and safety of residents during that phase out period."

Because the Murphy Site continues to operate in Jefferson Park, activists like Parks and residents like Titus continue to demand safer conditions.

"If we don't stand up and demand that we get equitable treatment, then who will? How long are we going to allow this?" Titus said. "We're going to stand up and cause this to end. Either they will treat us equitably or they will be shut down, in the name of Jesus."

That equitable treatment may finally be coming to Jefferson Park after a Letter of Determination was released by the city of Los Angeles' Office of Zoning Administration on Feb. 28. The legally binding document outlines more than 30 conditions, meant to "increase the protection of and to preserve the health, safety and general welfare of the residents and stakeholders of the neighborhood," that E&B Natural Resources must meet in order to continue operations at the Murphy Drill Site.

According to the document, E&B Natural Resources is already compliant with many of the conditions, but fails to meet crucial ones like not allowing avoidable "noise, vibration, dust, odor or other harmful or annoying substances" to affect nearby residents.



Signs on the Murphy Drill Site gate. (Capital & Main/Isabel Avila)

Further, the letter also imposes new conditions and appears to address some of the community's highest-priority demands, such as the construction of a 45-foot-tall barrier to enclose the site within two years, and the transition to exclusive use of electric power for onsite operations.

According to Angela Johnson Meszaros, Redeemer Community Partnerships' legal counsel at Earthjustice, failure to meet the conditions could spell an end to E&B Natural Resources' Murphy operation.

"If they can't comply with the requirements, the city can petition the court to declare them a nuisance," Johnson Meszaros said. "Nuisance operations have to be corrected or shut down."

Advocates have spent years fighting the harmful effects of the Murphy Drill Site but, according to Parks, this latest development represents the biggest step yet in protecting residents who have until now been ignored.

"The city's Murphy decision begins to set right the wrongs of malign neglect, sacrificial zonings and environmental racism that for decades left South L.A. families more exposed to the harms of neighborhood oil drilling than those in wealthier, whiter, West L.A. neighborhoods," Parks said. "It is a tremendous victory for South L.A. residents."

Jefferson Park residents like Titus are grateful for the development and recognize that the city's latest effort will make a real difference in people's lives. Still, they say work remains to be done.

"It's hard to say that it's a victory because those protections should have always been there," Titus said. "We're glad we were able to make people do the right thing, but when will people do what is right because it's right, not because of some threat? Only then will we live in a just society."

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