

6,300 sign petition of support for Mendocino County fracking ordinance

Petition submitted to Elections Office

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for *Ukiah Daily Journal*

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KAREN RIFKIN FOR UKIAH DAILY JOURNAL The Community Rights Network of Mendocino County has...

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Shannon Biggs, community rights director of Global Exchange in San Francisco, assists communities in passing new laws that place the right of residents over the interests of corporations.

On June 27, she and a large contingent of local activists, The Community Rights Network of Mendocino County, presented the county registrar's office with a fracking ordinance

petition signed by more than 6,300 registered voters, more than enough to qualify the issue for the November ballot.

If approved by voters, the initiative would put the rights of Mendocino County residents over those of outside fracking corporations.

It is a rights-based ordinance stating that decisions about water and fracking are to be made by residents, asserting their rights to make decisions about local water and preventing it from being redirected to fracking operations.

"Fracking isn't the issue; it's a symptom," says Biggs. "The issue is who decides policy where people live; if it isn't the residents then there's a problem with democracy. People in Mendocino feel that they want to control decision-making, not the corporations. This is seen as a first step in changing the rules, making sure that the people who live here make their own governing decisions."

According to Biggs, fracking, unconventional drilling for oil or gas, is the worst energy idea in California history; it uses millions of gallons of water and millions of gallons of toxic chemicals, sending them two miles into the earth to crack open hard shale to capture trapped natural gas and oil stored in the shale. Where fracking is happening, she said, death and destruction follow and California is a recent addition to the fracking game.

Her concerns about fracking include the following: toxic chemicals leach into aquifers and ground water and poison the water; toxic chemicals and water are stored above ground in open air pits releasing toxic gases into the air; there are cancer clusters occurring; farming animals are getting sick and dying, asthma rates are rising, birth defects are occurring. Neurotoxins are used and becoming part of our ecosystem.

"There are earthquakes where fracking is happening in places like Ohio, proven to be the result of fracking, where previously they never happened. Here we sit in California on top of major earthquake faults tempting fate," she says.

Members of Global Exchange, an international human rights organization dedicated to promoting social, economic and environmental justice around the world, have assisted residents of Mendocino in a series of public teaching events, beyond fracking, focusing on how it is that policy decisions about what happens to local residents are made outside the areas in which these residents live. They help educate communities with public events, bringing in experts in the field, and partnering with law firms to write the ordinances.

Meg Courtney, vice mayor of Fort Bragg, attended a two-day workshop last winter presented by Paul Cienfuegos, a spokesman for the community rights approach, showing how to accomplish what has previously seemed impossible.

The idea originated with a group of environmental lawyers, the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund, who were unsuccessfully challenging the EPA. The idea to organize and create legal ordinances is galvanizing people and spreading on the East Coast, in Pennsylvania in particular, where widespread fracking and factory farms are destroying water, the environment and competition, she says.

"One day," says Courtney, "we learned how corporations have totally stifled democracy in our country. I am frustrated with what is happening to our environment and the stranglehold the corporations have on our government, particularly oil and gas. We have no real democracy anymore in this country.

"A corporation comes in and destroys a community? What you do? What the colonies did prior to the American Revolution, decide not to play by their rules anymore. We are going to play by our own rules. It's appealing because it's a positive approach; we are saying yes to our community for clean air and clean water, what we need to live; it's a yes to all of us."

Karina McAbee from Willits, an active member of the network in support of the ordinance, attended the same workshops as Courtney. A large group of residents, over 90, from the coast and inland, participated last fall and winter getting educated on how to legally create an ordinance.

"We want to head fracking off before it happens. Part of the ordinance is a community bill of rights affirming our inalienable rights as human beings to protect ourselves, our families, our communities and our water from the effects of fracking. We have rights of a natural community and ecosystem to be free from harm; the rights of human beings are superior to the "rights" of corporations," she says.

They have based their ordinance on the Board of Supervisors precautionary policy adopted in June 2006, stating, "every resident, present and future, of Mendocino County has an equal right to a healthy and safe environment. This requires that our air, water, earth, and food be of a sufficiently high standard that individuals and communities can live healthy, fulfilling, and dignified lives. The duty to enhance, protect and preserve Mendocino County's environment, community health, and quality of life rests on the shoulders of local government, residents, citizen groups, and businesses alike."

Biggs says, "This is about a community being in charge; as part of Global Exchange we are demonstrating how 170 communities across the nation have done what we are doing here: passing ordinances on fracking, banning toxic sludge from being spread, banning water withdrawal, stopping toxic dumping, forbidding large industrial hog farms from moving into town.

"These are all symptoms of the larger problem; this is about putting communities in charge of decision-making. Everywhere we go we find a system of laws that allow corporations to turn a profit at the expense of the health, safety and welfare of residents. We call that a democracy problem, and it needs to stop.

"Mendocino is on the cutting edge of writing new rules for corporations, on the front lines for the fracking fight and for democracy nationwide."