

## NM county ordinance bans oil, gas development

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ALBUQUERQUE, N.M.—A sparsely populated county in northern New Mexico has taken aim at the oil and natural gas industry, approving an ordinance that outlaws the extraction of the natural resources and puts the county's decision-making rights ahead of business interests and federal and state permits.

The Mora County Commission voted 2-1 on Monday in favor of the ordinance, which is aimed primarily at protecting groundwater sources across the county.

"Everyone understands the drought that New Mexico is currently in," Commission Chairman John Olivas said. "Our acequias and our irrigation canals are dry, so the whole idea is resource protection."

Olivas said he believes Mora County is the first in the nation to impose an outright ban on oil and gas development.

Some communities in New Mexico and elsewhere have passed moratoriums on oil and gas development, while others have tightened restrictions or banned the practice of hydraulic fracturing, in effect, severely limiting the amount of drilling that can be done.

In neighboring San Miguel County, a drilling moratorium has been in place for three years as county officials consider revamping regulations to address concerns about water use, road damage and drilling waste.

Since there are no active oil or gas wells within Mora County, experts say it's too soon to say what effect the ordinance will have, other than providing notice to the industry that it is not welcome.

In addition to putting the county off limits to oil and gas development, the ordinance establishes a bill of rights aimed at affirming the county's right to [local](#) autonomy and self-governance.

The ordinance states that any permits or licenses issued by either the federal or state government that would allow activities that would compromise the county's rights would be considered [invalid](#).

"This is the fight that people have been too chicken to pick over the last 10 years, which is essentially deciding who makes decisions about the future of the places where we live," said Thomas Linzey, executive director of the Community Environmental Legal Defense Fund. "Either it's the people who live there or it's the corporations that have an interest in exploiting them. It's very basic."

The nonprofit [law firm](#) helped the county draft the ordinance and plans to defend it against any legal challenges. The Pennsylvania-based firm is also behind anti-fracking ordinances passed by the cities of Las Vegas, N.M., and Pittsburgh.