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Application to drill for oil in Surrey Hills renewed

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A Green Party councillor has called for a “rethink” of oil extraction practices in the south of England after research suggested a possible link between drilling and a series of minor earthquakes in Surrey.

Small tremors between magnitude 1.34 and 3.18 were recorded across 2018 and 2019 in the Newdigate area, within a few miles of an oil drilling site at Horse Hill near Gatwick.

Planning permission is being sought to resume oil extraction at the site after its previous approval was quashed by the Supreme Court in 2024 following a long-running campaign.

The court ruled that downstream greenhouse gas emissions should have been considered in any environmental assessment. Surrey County Council said at the time it believed planning rules had been followed.

A UK Oil and Gas Plc (UKOG) statement from the same year said: “A detailed plan for a safe, full suspension of related operations and activities will be implemented following SCC’s concurrence.”

However, charity Friends of the Earth is calling on Surrey County Council to reject this fresh drilling application after presenting a report by Professor Stuart Haszeldine of the University of Edinburgh highlighting a potential link between oil production and earthquakes.

Professor Haszeldine’s work claims there is a “substantial body of evidence” linking the 2018 to 2019 tremors to oil production at Horse Hill.

A 2025 study by University College London researchers published in Geological Magazine also investigated a possible link, running more than one million simulations to assess any correlation.

Lead author Dr Matthew Fox said: “Our study suggests there is a link between the ground earthquakes and oil extraction at Horse Hill but we cannot rule out that this link is a coincidence.”

Dr Fox added that while more work needs to be done to establish if there is a cause and effect, their findings suggest it is “plausible” that oil extraction was behind the tremors.

A UKOG spokesperson previously said British Geological Survey experts “were satisfied it was a natural event associated with movement on a deeper, unassociated fault many miles deeper and distant from the site”.

But Surrey County Councillor Jonathan Essex (Green Party: Redhill East) told the Local Democracy Reporting Service he thinks Professor Haszeldine’s work should prompt “a rethink in how oil drilling is considered in planning terms in the south of England”.

He wants the definition of fracking to be expanded to include all “unconventional oil extraction”, which would see sites like Horse Hill brought under a government moratorium on the practice.

At present, the effective ban only applies to hydraulic fracturing for shale gas – more commonly known as fracking – due to concerns around related seismic activity.

But other forms of hydraulic fracturing in the conventional extraction of oil and gas, such as acid squeezes, are not covered by the government’s moratorium.

Councillor Essex said: “The definition of fracking must be extended to include all unconventional oil extraction – which would then mean that the likes of Horse Hill and other developments across southern England would fall under the current fracking ban.”

The previous Conservative government halted fracking in England in 2019, and the current Labour government has voiced its intent to permanently ban the practice.

Councillor Essex added: “The only way to increase energy security and reduce energy prices in the UK is to increase renewable energy production and to reduce our overall energy demand, such as by insulating our homes.”

A Surrey County Council spokesperson said: “Any comments or issues raised in response to the application will be considered by officers during the determination process in due course.”

UKOG and its subsidiary Horse Hill Developments Ltd did not respond to the Local Democracy Reporting Service’s requests for comment.

A Department for Energy Security and Net Zero spokesperson said: “We intend to ban fracking for good and make Britain a clean energy superpower, to bring energy security, lower bills, and protect current and future generations.”

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James Moules Local Democracy Reporter

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Photo: Sarah Finch Horse Hill 5 Nov 2021 Redhill climate campaigner Sarah Finch at Horse Hill rally 5 Nov 2021. Credit Denise Laura Baker, cleared for use

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