



Up hill struggle to stop oil drilling in Surrey - pays off?

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A clash between environmental advocates and oil developers at Horse Hill in Surrey has resurfaced as local campaigners question why oil production continues despite a lack of planning permission. The Weald Action Group, which represents numerous community groups opposing fossil fuel extraction across Southeast England, has raised concerns over ongoing operations by Horse Hill Developments Ltd (HHDL). The site, located in the Surrey Hills, is still producing oil even though the Supreme Court recently ruled that planning permission was granted unlawfully, citing omissions in the environmental impact assessment.

This summer, the UK Supreme Court upheld a challenge brought by environmentalist Sarah Finch on behalf of the Weald Action Group. The ruling faulted Surrey County Council for not considering indirect greenhouse gas emissions linked to the burning of the oil produced at Horse Hill when they approved the application. Consequently, the planning approval was nullified, marking a significant win for the environmental action group and setting a precedent that has since impacted other oil and gas sites across the UK.

In response to continued production at Horse Hill, the Weald Action Group's legal team has written to Surrey County Council, requesting clarity on whether HHDL's operations are indeed unauthorized and if the council intends to enforce a halt to production until retrospective planning permissions are secured. "It's not clear why UKOG are still producing oil at Horse Hill despite having no planning permission to do so," the group's spokesperson stated. Meanwhile, Chris Coghlan, the newly elected MP for Dorking and Horley, has also pressed the council for answers.

The council's statement confirmed it is aware of the issue, stressing that without planning permission, HHDL's production activities may indeed be unlawful. It stated: "Following the Supreme Court decision, there is no planning permission for oil production at the site... The County Council is continuing its enforcement investigation and will determine whether formal enforcement action is expedient." While the council refrained from offering a definitive timeline, it confirmed that formal enforcement remains a possibility, pending the ongoing investigation.

For the Weald Action Group and concerned residents, the situation underscores broader frustrations with fossil fuel projects in rural areas. Their efforts highlight a commitment to maintaining local accountability and environmental protections, especially in ecologically sensitive areas like the Surrey Hills.

UPDATE:

In a major development in the ongoing Horse Hill oil drilling controversy, UK Oil & Gas PLC (UKOG) has ordered the cessation of oil production at its Horse Hill site following intense public and political pressure. The decision comes after weeks of scrutiny, with mounting calls from local activists, national environmental groups, media outlets, and the newly elected MP for Dorking and Horley, Chris Coghlan, urging an end to operations that lacked valid planning permission.

The Weald Action Group, which represents a network of community groups opposed to oil and gas development in the Southeast, welcomed the decision but condemned the circumstances that led to it. "We are pleased that they have now suspended operations," they stated, "but we are appalled that it took protests by Extinction Rebellion, news coverage, questions from the local MP, and the threat of legal action by Friends of the Earth to bring them to this conclusion." According to the group, the suspension followed sustained pressure and widespread public outrage over UKOG's ongoing activities despite the Supreme Court's ruling that rendered Horse Hill's planning permission invalid.

Brian Alexander, Communications Director for UKOG, initially defended the company's position, claiming on Channel 4 that production at Horse Hill was compliant. "It's not unlawful. We would not be doing it if it was unlawful... We are of the understanding, certainly from Surrey, that we are doing what we should be doing," Alexander told the media.

In a statement issued after halting production, UKOG announced: "After recent discussions with Surrey County Council (SCC) and in keeping with the Company's strategic move from oil & gas into material scale clean hydrogen storage projects, we instructed our subsidiary Horse Hill Developments Ltd (HHDL) to voluntarily suspend oil production at the Horse Hill site." The suspension, effective as of Friday, October 25, reportedly aligns with the company's new focus on hydrogen storage projects, reflecting a shift away from oil and gas.

UKOG emphasized that its actions regarding Horse Hill had been lawful, adding that HHDL has maintained regulatory compliance throughout its six years of operations. The company noted that discussions with Surrey County Council had been ongoing since June 2024 and included a recent site visit by council officials on October 16. UKOG stated it will now work closely with Surrey County Council to ensure a thorough suspension process and to support the planning redetermination process. This includes safely securing and decommissioning the Horse Hill site in compliance with environmental regulations.

The Weald Action Group, meanwhile, remains vigilant, stressing that it will continue to monitor UKOG's activities and press for accountability at Horse Hill and other oil sites across the region. The group's focus now turns to ensuring that any future decisions align with environmental protections and the community's demands for transparency and local oversight.

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