

Politics

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CLIMATE & ENVIRONMENT

# Under Trump, Texas firm pushes to restart Santa Barbara oil drilling. Is it skirting California laws?



An offshore oil platform with Santa Cruz Island in the background in California's Santa Barbara Channel. (Marli Miller/UCG/via Getty Images)

**By Grace Toohey**  
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More than 50 years ago, [a catastrophic oil spill](#) along Santa Barbara's coastline served to galvanize the [modern environmental movement](#) and also helped to usher in one of the state's strongest conservation laws: the California Coastal Act.

Now, as the Trump administration [seeks to encourage](#) oil and gas production within federal lands and waters, that watershed conservation law is being tested along the same stretch of coastline — and in a way it never has before.

For months, a Texas-based oil company has rebuffed the authority of the California Coastal Commission — the body tasked with enforcing the act — and has instead [pushed forward with controversial plans to revive](#) oil production off the Gaviota Coast.

Ten years after another spill brought oil production here to a halt, Sable Offshore Corp. has [begun repairing and upgrading](#) the network of oil pipelines responsible for that 2015 spill, without Coastal Commission approval and ignoring the commission's repeated demands to stop its work, officials say.



Crews bag oiled sand and kelp at Refugio State Beach in May 2015, after a ruptured pipeline near Santa Barbara leaked an estimated 140,000 gallons of crude oil. (Al Seib / Los Angeles Times)

“This is the first time in the agency’s history that we’ve had a party blatantly ignore a cease and desist order like this and refuse to submit a permit application,” Cassidy Teufel, deputy director of the California Coastal Commission, told a packed [town hall](#) recently.



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Sable has accused the commission of “overreach” and [insists](#) that it has acquired the necessary approvals for its work.

The company intends to revive operations at three oil platforms known as the Santa Ynez Unit, which connects to pipelines that have been the focus of the ongoing repair work after a [corroded section of those pipes](#) ruptured near Refugio State Beach in 2015. That pipeline failure, which occurred under different ownership, spewed an estimated 140,000 gallons of crude oil, harmed hundreds of miles of coastline and cost millions to clean up.



#### CLIMATE & ENVIRONMENT

### Nearly 10 years after California oil spill, plan to reactivate pipeline sparks anger

Oct. 14, 2024

[In a new report](#), Coastal Commission staff allege that Sable’s activities — which include excavation, grading, removing vegetation and placing cement bags on the seafloor — “have adversely impacted, and continue to adversely impact, coastal resources as a result of Sable’s outright refusal to comply with the Coastal Act.”

The report recommends that commissioners fine Sable almost \$15 million, issue another cease and desist order for all development along the pipelines and require restoration work.

## Timeline of alleged violations surrounding the reactivation of oil pipelines in Santa Barbara

The California Coastal Commission (CCC) alleges Sable Offshore Corp. is in violation of the Coastal Act by performing unauthorized work on the pipelines. Sable is challenging these claims and is suing the commission.

Notices and orders issued by CCC

**Feb. 14, 2024**

**Purchase agreement of Santa Ynez Unit** finalized between Exxon Mobil and Sable Offshore Corp.

## Fall 2024

**Development begins on onshore pipeline**, allegedly without proper Coastal Act permitting or prior notification to CCC.

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## Mid-September

**CCC is alerted of onshore work.** CCC reaches out to Sable to confirm onshore work and request applications for work undertaken and future, proposed work. Santa Barbara County Planning and Development Department staff are alerted by CCC of the work and that it appeared in violation of the Coastal Act.

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## Sept. 27

**First Notice of Violation letter from the CCC** directing Sable to cease unpermitted activities and apply for necessary permits.

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## Early October

**Sable responds to CCC that work has stopped** after the notice of violation. However, CCC staff say they continued to receive reports that showed otherwise and issues a Notice of Intent for an Executive Director Cease and Desist Order if work isn't stopped.

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## Oct. 30

**Santa Barbara County officials approve permit transfer for Sable to take over** the pipeline's decade-old permit, which Sable uses as justification to continue work. CCC disagrees with this decision.

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## Nov. 12

**CCC issues an executive director cease-and-desist order** addressing Sable's onshore work along the pipeline.

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## Late November

**Sable begins development at offshore pipeline locations**, again without Coastal Act permits state officials say are required. (CCC becomes aware of this in January.)

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## Feb. 11, 2025

**CCC issues notice of violation** to Sable for offshore work that was restarted.

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## Feb. 18

**CCC issues a second cease-and-desist order.** Sable sues the CCC in Santa Barbara County Superior Court, alleging that the commission does not have such authority of its work.

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## March 10

**Sable sends a defense letter to the CCC** defending its ongoing work, questioning the commission's jurisdiction over its project.

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## April 10

**The CCC has an enforcement hearing scheduled** about Sable's pipeline work, arguing that the commission should order another cease-and-desist order, mandate restoration work and issue a \$15-million fine.

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California Coastal Commission filings

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The requested sanctions will be considered next week at a public hearing — one of the first such venues for citizens to weigh in on reactivation of the offshore oil rigs and how that could affect the local environment, which [has long concerned](#) Santa Barbara residents and climate activists.

Sable insists it does not need to comply with the latest Coastal Commission requests.

“The repair and maintenance work done to ensure the safe condition of the Santa Ynez Unit and onshore pipelines was fully authorized by coastal development permits previously approved by the California Coastal Commission and Santa Barbara County,” Steve Rusch, Sable’s vice president of environmental and governmental affairs, said in a prepared statement. “Commission staff’s unreasonable overreach is an attempt to exert influence over the planned restart of the Santa Ynez Unit oil production operations.”

In a [statement of defense](#) submitted to the Coastal Commission, Sable noted that due to updated requirements, “this pipeline will meet more stringent environmental and safety requirements than any other pipeline in the state.”

The company called the commission’s findings on environmental impacts exaggerated, and noted that it has “implemented several construction best management practices to limit impacts to coastal resources, biological resources, and archaeological resources,” Sable wrote.



Cleanup workers pile bags of oil-soaked sand at Refugio State Beach in Goleta after a 2015 oil pipeline rupture. (Mel Melcon / Los Angeles Times)



CALIFORNIA

**Exxon scraps plan for new pipeline after 2015 spill — but may try to resurrect old one**

Oct. 31, 2023

## So who's in charge of such projects?

If Sable succeeds in restarting operations, it would mark a surprising reversal for California's oil and gas industry in recent years, as climate-focused policies have [slowly reduced](#) the state's production of fossil fuels.

The Houston-based company estimates that once the Santa Ynez Unit is fully online, it could produce an estimated 28,000 barrels of oil a day, according to an [investor](#)

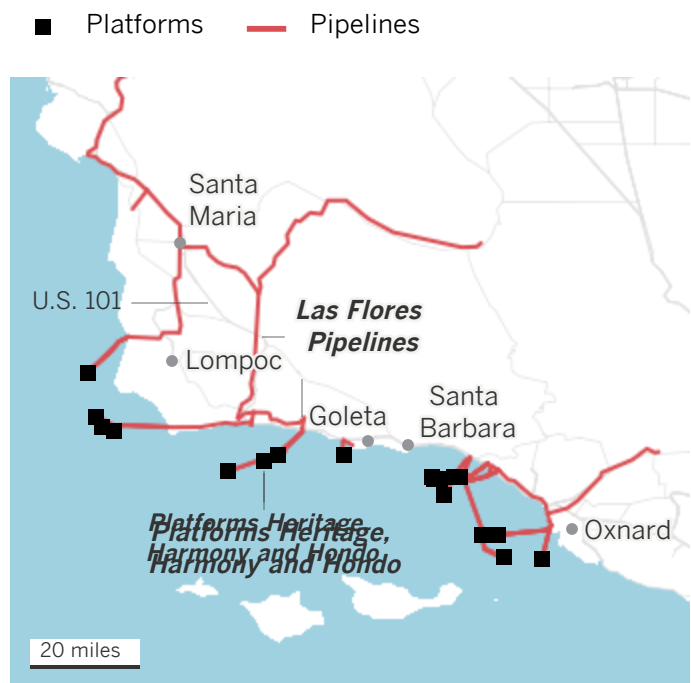
## presentation.

The unit has three offshore platforms — Hondo, Harmony and Heritage — located in federal waters a few miles off the coast. These platforms are connected to the Las Flores Canyon processing facility, inland from El Capitan State Beach, and other distribution lines that run onshore. The 2015 Refugio oil spill was caused by the rupture of a buried onshore pipeline.

Sable [has said it anticipates](#) restarting offshore oil production in the second quarter this year, but the company acknowledges that some regulatory and oversight hurdles remain. Most notably, its restart plan must be approved by the [state fire marshal](#).

## Oil and gas pipelines and platforms near the Santa Barbara Channel

Sable Offshore Corp. is attempting to restart oil operations in the Santa Ynez Unit, which includes the Las Flores Pipelines and Platforms Heritage, Harmony and Hondo.



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Platforms include those in federally regulated waters. Platform Holly, located offshore of Goleta, is in state waters. Bureau of Ocean Energy Management and Santa Barbara County Planning & Development

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Though Sable has already cleared some of that agency's major regulatory steps, State Fire Marshal Daniel Berlant has said the company's final restart plan wouldn't be



approved without agreement from a handful of other state agencies, including the Coastal Commission.

“Before we would ever sign off on a pipeline, [we will make] sure that each of these departments has agreed that all of the rules have been followed,” Berlant said at the March town hall.

Berlant also assured Santa Barbarans that since the 2015 spill, the fire marshal’s office has implemented more stringent standards for oil infrastructure, which are part of Sable’s plan. He said his office requires 67 new conditions focused on safety and corrosion protection, stricter and more frequent monitoring and repair standards.



#### CALIFORNIA

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March 29, 2025

Sable, however, has most heavily relied on recent approval from Santa Barbara County Planning & Development, which in October said the company could proceed with its corrosion repair work under the pipeline’s original county permit from the 1980s. The company contends it is still relevant because its work is only repairing and maintaining an existing pipeline, not constructing new infrastructure.

After concern from the Coastal Commission and environmental groups, county officials confirmed its position in February, concluding that Sable’s repair work on the corroded pipeline “is authorized by the existing permits ... [and] was analyzed in the prior Environmental Impact Report/Environmental Impact Statement.”



A worker cleans oil from the rocks and beach at Refugio State Beach in Goleta, Calif. in 2015. (Mark Ralston/AFP via Getty Images)

Coastal Commission staff have questioned how a permit from nearly 40 years ago can adequately take into account current technology, requirements to remedy corrosion issues and environmental conditions.

“The removal of the pipeline’s insulation and implementation of this new strategy for managing corrosion risk represents such a fundamental shift in the pipeline’s design and operation that resuming operations under this new system would not be consistent with the existing permit,” the staff report said. It also argues that old permits don’t take into account current habitats or sensitive species in the area, including those newly considered endangered or threatened, such as the steelhead, the tidewater goby and the California red-legged frog.



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Ultimately, the matter may be determined in court. In February, Sable sued the Coastal Commission claiming it doesn't have the authority to oversee its work.

"Sable's representatives have told us that they'll only stop if a court makes them, so we've been working with the attorney general's office for the past month to move in that direction," Teufel said at a town hall last month in Santa Barbara. The event drew hundreds of attendees — clearly divided between those donning Sable hats and others holding signs that read, "No polluting pipeline" and "No coastal permit, no restart."

But as of yet, California Atty. Gen. Rob Bonta hasn't weighed in. A spokesperson for the office declined to respond to questions from The Times, referring inquiries to the Coastal Commission.

## A controversial legacy

Since 1969, when the blowout of on an offshore oil platform spewed more than 3 million gallons of crude oil into the Santa Barbara Channel and devastated the coastline, environmentalists have fought to shut down offshore oil rigs along the Gaviota Coast. In their view, Sable's behavior has been beyond the pale.

"So far this has been happening with no environmental review," said Alex Katz, the executive director of the the Environmental Defense Center, which was founded after the 1969 spill. "For a project that's this big and has this much risk, it's very strange."

At the same time, other residents see economic value in oil extraction.





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1. Men in boats and on shore gather in straw being used to soak up oil in Santa Barbara Harbor. A boom helps contain the worst of the oil slick, which has stained 30 miles of coastline. This photo was published in the Feb. 10, 1969 Los Angeles Times. The Santa Barbara oil spill of 1969 (Don Cormier/Los Angeles Times) 2. Cormorant's bill is held by rubber band during bath to remove oil after the Santa Barbara oil spill. This photo was published in the Feb. 10, 1969 Los Angeles Times. (Mary Frampton/Los Angeles Times) 3. Workman Dave Kirkwood sprays live steam rocks at the harbor at Santa Barbara breakwater to clear oil smears. This photo was published in the Feb. 10, 1969 Los Angeles Times. The Santa Barbara oil spill of 1969 (Don Cormier/Los Angeles Times)

Santa Barbara County Supervisor Bob Nelson has called much of the concern around the pipeline “political theater.” He said he generally agrees that Sable has the necessary permits to restart oil production, and noted that local oil is better than the alternative, especially when there’s still demand for such fuel.

“If you really cared about climate change, you’d want to use this oil,” Nelson said in an interview, arguing that it’s better to use local resources than oil shipped from around the world, where there are likely fewer environmental regulations and no local tax revenue or jobs. Sable has reported it expects the project to initially generate \$5 million a year in new taxes for the county and, upon restart, would support an additional 300 jobs.



## CLIMATE &amp; ENVIRONMENT

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Jan. 21, 2025

At the town hall last month, Assemblymember Gregg Hart (D-Santa Barbara) called on California's attorney general to get involved in this process to uphold the state's environmental laws, noting that there are clear risks, as with any offshore drilling project.

"It is a false choice to say we have to choose between protecting our environment and growing our economy," Hart said at the packed hearing that included representatives from at [least eight state agencies](#).. "We have experience here in this community of the tragedies that come from companies that don't operate responsibly. ... We have some serious concerns about what's being proposed with the Sable pipeline."

Some of those state agencies, including the California Department of Fish and Wildlife, the State Water Resources Control Board and the California Department of Parks and Recreation, have also raised concerns about Sable's work. The regional water board in December issued Sable a noncompliance notice for unauthorized discharge into waterways, while wildlife officials alerted the company of a potential Fish and Game Code violation. Sable's response to those issues remain under review.

Yet, the full extent of completed or possible environmental damage from this project remains unclear, the Coastal Commission argues, because Sable hasn't shared detailed plans or applied for permits. And that's a precedent that should be concerning for all Californians, said Linda Krop, chief counsel for the Environmental Defense Center.

"This is the biggest threat to the California coast," Krop said. "They should not be allowed to operate when they're violating state laws."

Staff writer Tony Briscoe contributed to this report.

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**Grace Toohey**

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