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Department of Energy

# Oil spill still motivates Santa Barbara to be green

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The massive offshore oil spill in Santa Barbara in 1969 galvanized the environmental movement, locally and perhaps nationally. | Photo courtesy Bob Duncan

Many residents of Santa Barbara County in California still remember the 1969 oil spill there, when [an oil drill six miles off the county's coast blew out](#), spilling an estimated 8,000 to 10,000 barrels of crude oil. The resulting oil slick covered 800 square miles of ocean, killing thousands of birds and marine animals and depositing tar on beaches throughout the state's Central Coast.

The spill established a strong environmental awareness in Santa Barbara County. Among the positive results was the establishment of the [Community Environmental Council of Santa Barbara](#), a nonprofit organization that does environmental education, outreach and advocacy.

"That [incident] set the tone for how Santa Barbara thinks about itself and what it wants to be," Sigrid Wright, assistant director of the CEC, says. "We are a coastal

community, and a spill like that really devastated the community for many years.”

The CEC is harnessing that awareness to achieve an ambitious goal – leading Santa Barbara County to complete independence from fossil fuels by 2033. In fact, the Fossil Free by '33 program is now the organization's exclusive mission. The CEC estimates the county will need about 21,500 GWh of energy in 2030, including electricity, natural gas and fuel for cars, trucks and airplanes. Fossil Free by '33 aims to meet that need with a combination of alternative energy and increased energy efficiency.

The plan can be divided roughly into three parts: reduced energy use in buildings, transportation improvements and increased reliance on renewable energy. Sigrid says the CEC is focusing heavily on energy efficiency right now, in part because building codes are under local control.

Transportation is a more challenging part of the plan because there's limited local control over automotive innovations. In addition, driving can be a necessity in the county. While the city of Santa Barbara is pedestrian-friendly, the county's other population centers are well to the north, in cities like Santa Maria and Lompoc. The lower cost of living in that side of the county encourages some to commute as far as 60 miles one way.

To reduce petroleum use, the CEC is calling on residents to cut back on their driving – a change it acknowledges will be difficult for many people. The group also advocates land planning that makes this possible by placing residential areas closer to shopping and workplaces. And while Santa Barbara County can't make its own cars, the organization called on residents to vote with their dollars for smaller, more fuel-efficient vehicles.

“We have people who are thirsty for an alternative to the gas guzzler,” Sigrid says. “We also have higher income levels, so our folks here are willing to invest in things they believe in.”

The third part of the plan calls for increased use of renewable energy sources. It calls for use of onshore and offshore wind power, solar power and experimental wave power. Sigrid says the CEC has already helped get approval for the county's first wind farm, the [Lompoc Wind Energy Project](#). When completed, the project will generate up to 97.5 MW of electricity, enough to power more than 40,000 homes.

The CEC works hard to explain to residents why Fossil Free by '33 is so important and to help them understand that even a small step like walking to work can help move the

county toward energy independence.

What does this mean for me?

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