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NEWS

Earthquake Activity Increases in Part of Texas Heavy in Oil and Gas Production

By Jan Wesner Childs · November 06 2019 03:30 PM EST · weather.com



A Texas oil well is shown in this file photo. A new study shows a dramatic increase in earthquakes in one part of Texas that is being heavily developed for oil and gas.

(Spencer Platt/Getty Images)

At a Glance

- More than 2,000 earthquakes were recorded in one part of West Texas in 2017.
- The increase correlates with a rise in oil and gas production.

A part of Texas that is being heavily

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developed for oil and gas production has seen a dramatic increase in earthquakes over the past decade, a new study shows.

Researchers examined more than 7,000 seismic events in West Texas between 2000 and 2017, according to [the study](#) published this week in the *Journal of Geophysical Research - Solid Earth*. The analysis showed that a disproportionate number have happened in the last 10 years in an area near Pecos known as the Delaware Basin. The uptick began after 2007, when just one earthquake was recorded in the area. Nineteen earthquakes happened in 2009 and more than 2,000 temblors were tracked in 2017.

The study points out that seismic activity went up at the same time that petroleum production in the region increased, but it doesn't go so far as to make a direct conclusion.

"West Texas now has [the highest seismicity rates in the state](#)," study co-author and Southern Methodist University associate professor Heather DeShon said in a press release. "What remained uncertain is when the earthquakes actually started. This study addresses that."

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Several other studies [have linked hydraulic fracturing](#), known as [fracking](#), to a rise in earthquakes. Fracking is the process by which water is injected underground to create cracks in rocks to extract more crude oil and natural gas. The correlation [has been especially well documented in Oklahoma](#), where earthquake activity hit a high in 2015 and then steadily dropped once rules on fracking were tightened.

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Texas established a statewide earthquake monitoring system in 2017, but the new research tapped into an older array of seismographs installed in the 1990s to help track nuclear testing across the world, according to the press release. Data from those sensors helped create an earthquake catalog for the Delaware Basin that goes back further than any other previous studies.

Peter Hennings, a study co-author and researcher at the University of Texas Bureau of Economic Geology, said he hopes the research will help build "an integrated understanding" of "the relationship between earthquakes and their human and natural causes."

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