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Los Angeles Youth Groups Challenge Oil Industry's Retaliatory SLAPP Suit After Settlement of Legal Challenge to City's Drilling Practices, Oil Lobby Group Sues Young Plaintiffs to Chill Their Right to Petition

LOS ANGELES— An oil industry lawsuit against youth groups in South Los Angeles and Wilmington is “a classic example of a retaliatory strategic lawsuit against public participation” (“SLAPP Suit”) that violates California law, according to a special motion filed yesterday by the young people's attorneys.

Youth for Environmental Justice, the South Central Youth Leadership Coalition (SCYLC), and the Center for Biological Diversity (Center) sued the City of Los Angeles one year ago. That suit alleged a pattern and practice of violating the California Environmental Quality Act in approving drilling applications and unlawful racial discrimination by requiring inferior protective conditions for oil operations in communities of color, as compared to largely white communities.

While the suit was pending, L.A.'s Planning Department adopted new procedures for oil drilling applications designed to ensure compliance with state environmental review mandates and protect the health and safety of communities of color impacted by neighborhood drilling. In light of the new procedures, which addressed most of their allegations, the plaintiffs settled their suit against the city and dismissed the case on September 28, 2016.

On September 26, 2016, the California Independent Petroleum Association, which represents oil operators in California, filed a cross complaint against the youth groups, the Center, and the City of Los Angeles for settling the case. The oil industry lawsuit seeks to invalidate the settlement agreement.

Lawsuits brought in retaliation against people and organizations that exercise their freedom of speech and right to petition the government to redress grievances are known as SLAPP suits. California's anti-SLAPP statute is designed to protect people who exercise their right to participate in civic life by providing for the quick dismissal of non-meritorious lawsuits brought

to intimidate and harass those who speak out on issues of public importance. The statute provides for the special motion to dismiss a SLAPP suit that the groups have filed.

“These young leaders courageously asserted their rights against the City in challenging oil drilling permitting practices that endangered their neighborhoods, and the City did right by taking a hard look and adopting new procedures to comply with state laws,” said Gladys Limón, an attorney representing Youth for Environmental Justice. “The oil industry retaliated by filing meritless claims aimed to intimidate and deter them from continuing to speak out against the industry’s practices.”

“The youth plaintiffs stepped up to protect the health of their families, their communities, and their environment,” said Adam Wolf, an attorney for the youth groups. “Now these young people are standing up for their constitutional rights. The youth groups were sued because they challenged the way that the oil industry operates.”

“All too often, wealthy interests like the oil industry use every trick in the book to try to bully people into shutting up,” said Kassie Siegel, director of the Center for Biological Diversity’s Climate Law Institute. “California’s anti-SLAPP law is designed to protect groups against lawsuits like this one that lack merit but still impose an enormous time and cost burden.”

***Youth for Environmental Justice** (“Youth-EJ”) is a youth membership group with hundreds of high school and college student members in Southeast Los Angeles and Wilmington committed to achieving environmental justice in their communities.*

***South Central Youth Leadership Coalition (SCYLC)** is a grassroots project that grew organically in response and in defense of the health and safety of community members impacted by oil and natural gas extraction by the AllenCo Energy. SCYLC's mission is to work with all youth and collaborative allies in advocating for the environmental health, safety, and overall, human rights of the South Central Los Angeles community.*

*The **Center for Biological Diversity** is a national, nonprofit conservation organization with more than 1.1 million members and online activists dedicated to the protection of the Earth's biodiversity.*

Counsel for the plaintiffs are Gladys Limón of Communities for a Better Environment; Adam Wolf of Peiffer Rosca Wolf Abdullah Carr & Kane LLP; Maya Golden-Krasner and Kassie Siegel of Center for Biological Diversity; and Deepak Gupta of Gupta Wessler PLLC.