



Should oil companies be liable for earthquake-related damage?



Josh Edelson/AFP/Getty Images

Court case in Oklahoma examines whether oil and gas firms should be held liable for earthquake-related damage.

by *Scott Tong* (</people/scott-tong>)

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STORY

The Oklahoma Supreme Court will soon rule on a case that could hold oil and gas companies liable for earthquake-related damage.

Since 2009, Oklahoma has experienced earthquakes at a rate nearly 300 times higher than previous decades. Several peer-reviewed studies link seismic activity with oil and gas development — in Oklahoma's case, that's fracking.

The high court case is a personal-injury dispute. Four years ago in Prague, Oklahoma, a 5.7 earthquake struck and pieces of homeowner Sandra Ladra's chimney fell on her leg. Ladra may need a knee replacement, and sued two companies in the fracking wastewater business, arguing they caused the quake.

West Virginia law professor Josh Fershee says science links injection wells with earthquakes, but says Ladra's challenge is to prove wastewater disposal caused the 2011 tremor. If the companies lose, he expects industry to support new rules stipulating what the energy industry can do to avoid or limit quake liability.

Such changes cost money, as do new efforts to take fracking wastewater and recycle it. Still, if more lawsuits come, or more large quakes, the price of safety could be worth it to industry.

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