

Lawyers file 143-page objection to Malibu LNG project

Terrorism, smog, sea collision risks are underestimated, anti-LNG group claims. Billiton says Malibu residents should be used to ships by now.



BHP Billiton's giant "Typhoon" natural gas and oil platform bobs on the Louisiana coast after Hurricane Rita snapped its "hurricane-proof" anchor lines and blew it 110 miles into a beach. Each of the three concrete arms reaches 179 feet from the center, the entire structure was anchored undersea with the gas platform built on top. Opponents of the BHPB LNG terminal proposed for Malibu last week cited this engineering failure as an example of the company's poor track record designing offshore gas and oil platforms. Photo: ResourceInvestor.com

By Hans Laetz
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Attorneys and scientists at the Environmental Defense Center have filed the first official shot in Malibu's effort to derail an Australian company's application to anchor a liquified natural gas terminal 13.8 miles off the city's northwest end.

The Santa Barbara-based law center, partly funded by the City of Malibu and local donations, filed a 143-page

critique of the project's Environmental Impact Report last week. State and federal law requires government agencies to address the findings of such comments, and recommend improvements, before any approval can be granted.

The report issued by the California State Lands Commission two months ago says the BHP Billiton "Cabrillo Port" project would involve "significant and unavoidable" safety and environmental effects onshore and offshore, and poses a threat to public safety in the event of a collision at the terminal, damage to pipelines or a "significant" spill of LNG.

The report said the LNG terminal would not injure people on shore should it catch fire in a worst-case scenario. Although BHPB officials heralded that finding as a vote of confidence, it did nothing to eliminate local objections.

Among comments from Malibu residents filed late last week was an 18-page analysis from Kraig Hill, a Big Rock Mesa environmental consultant whose earlier findings helped derail the first Cabrillo Port EIR report when it was issued two years ago.

Hill told state officials that the latest assessment of the proposed LNG terminal leaves "the question as to whether the project is feasible unanswered, as many of the necessary analyses and technical studies remain incomplete."

For its part, the EDC said the government report about Cabrillo Port "continues to overlook or understate several significant environmental effects of the project, including impacts relating to air and water quality, safety, geologic hazards (including earthquakes and tsunamis), climate change, marine and terrestrial biology, marine traffic, and views."

The Lands Commission and two federal agencies, which are weighing the project's pros and cons, held hearings in Southern California on the environmental document last month. Although some groups such as the Oxnard Chamber of Commerce, the Australian government, marine industry workers and the Southern California Gas Company said they favor the alternative supply of energy, they did not make specific comments on the contents of the EIR.

Malibu's city council has earmarked \$50,000 for EDC's effort against the LNG terminal, which may eventually include lawsuits. In addition, local residents the Malibu Coastal Lands Coalition have pledged \$100,000 in matching funds to local contributions, with a total goal of at least \$250,000 raised in Malibu for the LNG fight.

A major issue emphasized in last week's filings is the massive size of Cabrillo Port, and its impact on Malibu's

ocean horizon. The environmental report says Cabrillo Port will be as big as the nation's largest aircraft carrier or as a supertanker, but concludes that coastal residents are used to seeing such vessels in the area.

The EDC counters that supertankers and aircraft carriers sail much further out to sea, and are much larger than the container ships that residents see steaming past Malibu. EDC said the permanent stationing of a ship "as large as the USS Ronald Reagan or the Exxon Valdez" is an "industrialization of offshore waters (that) detracts from views and the enjoyment of the ocean experience."

In response, BHP Billiton spokesman Patrick Cassidy quoted from the government study, which says 14 cargo ships cross the area every day, "and the existence of the (unit) will not substantially degrade the character of the area, or alter the character of the viewshed."

Ocean advocates also took issue with the government report's echoing of BHP Billiton's description of the LNG import proposal as a "clean-energy" project. The EDC contends that LNG will be nearly as polluting as coal, because 20 percent of the gas extracted in Malaysia or Australia will be burned in the process of liquefying, transporting, and reheating it.

The EDC also contends that at least 23 million tons per year of greenhouse gases, chiefly carbon dioxide, will be added to the world's atmosphere if the project is built. That amount equals about five percent of the total greenhouse gas generated across all of California today.

BHPB's Cassidy said Cabrillo Port would meet California's air standards, the strictest in the world. California does not at this time regulate the largest greenhouse gas emissions, carbon dioxide.

Hill and the EDC both note that Cabrillo Port would be anchored to the seabed using a technology that failed at a large BHP Billiton/Chevron gas platform called Typhoon off Louisiana last year. The supposedly-hurricane proof platform was wrenched loose by Hurricane Rita, and floated 110 miles before bouncing along the coast. The companies announced last week Typhoon would be sunk for a fishing reef.

EDC's report notes the likelihood of earthquakes or tsunamis in the area jarring loose the LNG terminal's anchors, and said "an accident like this occurring to the Cabrillo Port project would jeopardize coastal communities and populations."

BHPB's spokesman countered that claim by again quoting the government assessment, which critics said was insufficient in the first place. "As noted in the EIR," Cassidy said, "

the stringent design requirements that would be imposed on the (unit) ... are intended to provide inherent engineered safety features which reflect the type and magnitude of site-specific seismic, sea and weather conditions."

Opponents have also noted that at least five LNG terminals are proposed for the Los Angeles area, leading to the possibility that all five could be independently approved. Last week, a state official confirmed that a proposal for converting an unused oil platform off Ventura into an LNG terminal has been revived by a new company.

Also last week, Gov. Frank Murkowski of Alaska announced a contract to build a natural gas pipeline to the lower 48 states, which he said could supply U.S. natural gas at prices lower than foreign LNG imports. Alaska backers of a plan to ship North Slope LNG to Oxnard were disappointed when a state study predicted that regulatory and economic obstacles will block all of the LNG terminals proposed in California.