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Questionable documents filed in support of LNG

Federal officials say that opinions filed in support of or against a proposed liquefied natural gas facility to be located off the coast near Malibu are irrelevant.

Editor's note: The Malibu Times is conducting a series of stories on a proposed liquefied natural gas terminal for the coast of Malibu/Oxnard to examine safety, the need of LNG and others issues of concern. Reporter Hans Laetz, in an attempt to interview individual supporters of the proposed LNG terminal, came across people listed as supporters who say they never made any comments either in support or against the terminal. The following story is the result of his inquiry.

**By Hans Laetz/ Special to The Malibu Times
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An investigation by The Malibu Times shows that the federal file of comments and evidence about the proposed liquefied natural gas terminal near Malibu includes statements of support from several people who, when contacted by a reporter, said they never made any such comments.

In nearly every case, people who supposedly endorsed specific aspects of BHP Billiton's Cabrillo Port proposal told the newspaper they had never even heard of it, or of any plans to import LNG to California.

"I'm stunned," said LNG opponent Susan Jordan, director of the California Coastal Protection Effort, when told of the findings. "This is a possible fraud, a criminal act. It calls into question the entire environmental document."

Federal and state regulators both say the opinions are irrelevant, and therefore will not be investigated. "The bottom line is that it doesn't matter if a million people say they are for it or against it, it's not a referendum" said Cmdr. Mark Prescott, the Washington

official who leads the federal licensing office.

That's because the comments are in a public docket for collecting scientific and technical data about the project's environmental impact report.

"We can only respond to comments that address specific deficiencies in our analysis, not general opinions," said Cy Oggins, a California State Lands Commission executive who handles the state's EIR analysis.

Critics say any support, artificial or otherwise, could help Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger's campaign in support of an LNG terminal off the coast of Malibu/Oxnard. The governor last week publicly expressed his support for the BHP Billiton Cabrillo Port.

Elizabeth Crothers, a Sacramento spokeswoman for Californians for Clean Affordable Safe Energy, the group set up last fall to campaign for the three LNG terminals proposed for California, said, "This is amazing, stunning." Citing the 60 associations

and trade groups that support LNG imports, Crothers said "it is mystifying to me why people would need to invent people who support LNG when there are so many people out there in favor of it."

"I'm not surprised at dirty tricks used by the pro-LNG forces," said Malibu Mayor Andy Stern. "We've asked many questions about the adequacy of this EIR (environmental impact report), and this seems to be indicative of a problem with it."

At issue are comments filed via the Internet from as many as 50 different people in late December. The three or four sentence, one-paragraph comments all address different aspects of the BHPB plan. They originate in several specific geographic pockets: the suburbs of San Diego and Marin counties, and Sacramento. Names, addresses and phone numbers were included with the comments.

The Malibu Times was able to speak by phone with seven people whose names are used in statements that endorse specific details in the BHP Billiton plan.

None of those seven said they had made any comments for the federal record, and six said they had no opinion on the BHP Billiton project whatsoever.

One 77-year-old Sacramento woman said she had never heard of LNG, much less any request to build a floating LNG terminal. Nevertheless, Vernell Moddison is quoted in federal files as making a detailed statement in support of BHP Billiton that minimizes potential risks from the proposed floating LNG terminal:

"Yes, there is risk associated with natural gas and its transportation, but there have been pipelines and usage of natural gas in the state for something like 40 years," her

purported statement said. "I believe BHP will take every precaution to prevent an accident."

Moddison expressed astonishment when her alleged statement was read to her. "Why would anyone say I said that?" she asked a reporter. "I don't even know what they're talking about."

Although her comments were supposedly gathered via the Internet, Moddison said she does not know how to use a computer. She also said she is certain that there is no other Vernell Moddison in the state of California, and no other person with that surname was found in a statewide search by The Malibu Times.

Others contacted by The Malibu Times described themselves as surprised and angry. "I haven't talked to anybody," said Sacramento resident Mayland DeBusk. "I don't have any idea about the subject."

Another Sacramento-area resident, Jerry Longerbone, said, "I would have no reason to comment on it, I've never made a comment on it, I don't know what it is."

Jerry Schroedlie, a Roseville resident, said "I have no idea what you're talking about" when a reporter said he was listed as endorsing Cabrillo Port by name, and its supposed positive effect on California's agriculture industry.

A suburban San Diego County woman whose occupation is listed as "mom" also expressed a question about her purported comments. "I don't remember what you're talking about," said Tracey Bryan of Alpine. "What did you say I said? I'm extremely uncomfortable talking about this subject."

Very similar comments came from every person in the files who was contacted by The Malibu Times, except one: Michael Williams, a retired Navy man in Imperial Beach. He said he did not make the specific statement attributed to him in the federal records. But after a reporter read him the statement he allegedly filed on the Internet, he said he endorsed what persons unknown said on his behalf.

"I fully support what that company wants to do up in Ventura," he said. "I saw the terminals like that in Long Beach and Asia, and I know they can be safe, and this country needs the clean energy."

There are no LNG terminals in California, although Mitsubishi is negotiating with Long Beach officials to build one there.

But more typical was the comment of Santa Rosa tire store operator Joe B. Story, who was quoted as having said "it frustrates me that Malibu residents continue to complain about Cabrillo Port when it's located over the horizon and they won't even be able to see it from their beachside homes. As well, in truth, it's these large beach homes that utilize our natural resources the most. In my mind they have no right to complain about Cabrillo Port."

Story further said he had never heard of Cabrillo Port or the LNG import issue, and voiced displeasure to learn his name had been used by someone without his permission.

"Hey, I just run a tire store in Santa Rosa," he said. "I don't know anything about any horizon in Malibu."