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Offshore plant suffers setback

Ventura County air quality agency closes loophole for liquefied natural gas terminal.

By Gary Polakovic

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Ventura County's air quality board on Tuesday dealt a setback to a proposed \$800-million liquefied natural gas processing plant that would be moored about 14 miles offshore between Oxnard and Malibu.

The Air Pollution Control District board voted 9 to 0 to oppose a key permit that the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is preparing. It affirmed that the most rigorous clean-air regulations should apply to the project and directed the county's air pollution control officer to challenge the EPA's decision to exempt it.

Environmentalists, civic leaders and two members of the county Board of Supervisors had urged the board to act before the federal government issues a final air quality permit next year.

The board's decision, which followed a public hearing that drew more than 100 people, is significant because it closes a loophole that the EPA is using to allow Australian-based BHP Billiton to operate the offshore terminal under less stringent controls than would be required if it were built on land. The action could require BHP Billiton to spend millions more and make deeper emissions reductions to offset pollution from the project.

"The vote sends a strong message that [Ventura County] will stand up for air quality and the health of its citizens and that the EPA and Billiton will not be allowed to twist the rules," said Linda Krop, chief counsel for the Santa Barbara-based Environmental Defense Center.

But company officials said their project, called Cabrillo Port, is good for the environment and would be a portal for cleaner-burning natural gas that energy-starved California needs. They said the emission controls they propose exceed industry standards and would improve air quality in the Los Angeles region as well as the Central Coast.

"When we are constructed and operating, Cabrillo Port will improve the air quality and comply with the Clean Air Act in an environmentally sound manner," said Kathi Hamm, a Billiton spokeswoman.

Cabrillo Port would consist of a floating gas-processing platform the size of three football fields. Tanker ships would haul chilled liquefied natural gas from Asia and Australia. Eight heaters inside the terminal would warm the fuel, producing up to 1.5 billion cubic feet of natural gas per day.

But the terminal would also release up to 95 tons of ozone-forming pollutants annually. An additional 119 tons would result from small vessels and the two or three tankers expected to dock there each week — ranking the project as the top polluter in Ventura County.

Mike Villegas, executive officer of the Ventura County Air Pollution Control District, and officials for the Los Angeles-area South Coast Air Quality Management District warn that breezes would blow emissions onshore, contributing to pollution in some of the nation's smoggiest communities.

At issue is a series of rules Ventura County developed for new pollution sources. The county does not have direct authority over the project, but a federal law mandates that the Billiton terminal meet local clean-air rules.

The EPA and Billiton cite a so-called island exemption, which they say allows the liquefied natural gas terminal to meet a less rigorous cleanup standard, the one in force for Channel Islands National Park and a U.S. Navy facility on San Nicolas Island 70 miles offshore. EPA officials in California originally resisted that idea, but changed their stance under pressure from the company, the White House and EPA headquarters.

Ventura County officials initially followed suit, but Villegas said a closer reading of the regulation showed the project should not be exempt.

Amy Zimpfer, associate director of the EPA's air quality program in California, said the agency will carefully consider Ventura County's position.

"We're going to take a look at what they are submitting to us and what the analysis shows," Zimpfer said. "We will certainly take it into consideration."

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