

SANTA BARBARA NEWS-PRESS



Decision to truck oil expected within days

Permit opponents say county has legal right to deny application

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A decision on whether to allow ExxonMobil to temporarily haul crude oil from a plant near Gaviota to a San Luis Obispo facility is expected within days, officials said.

Last week, the company submitted an emergency permit application to the county to transport oil from the Las Flores Canyon plant to a Phillips 66 refinery on Willow Road in Arroyo Grande after the pipe normally used—owned and operated by Plains All American Pipeline—was shut down following the May 19 oil spill.

The decision, which will be made by Planning and Development Assistant Director Dianne Black, would be final and not open for appeal, Ms. Black told the News-Press.

Despite this, public comment on the emergency permit is being accepted, and can be sent to Ms. Black at dianne@countyofsb.org.

Following the 101,000-gallon spill last month, ExxonMobil was forced to reduce the average daily production of its Sanya Ynez Unit at Las Flores Canyon from 30,000 to 10,000 barrels, officials said.

Despite the reduction, company officials say the Las Flores Canyon could still reach maximum on-site oil storage in less than one month.

According to the permit application submitted last week, a one-way truck trip is about 72 miles and would include Main Street and Bonita School Road in Santa Maria prior to heading north on State Route 1 to the refinery entrance west of town.

The inability to move crude oil from Las Flores Canyon would also hamper ExxonMobil's ability to supply natural gas to southern California users.

The facility is multifaceted in that it not only feeds crude into the Plains pipeline, but also the facility separates out natural gas that is sent through another pipeline to Southern California Gas.

SoCal Gas has designed its regional supply chain to assume that the facility will contribute a minimum of 20 million cubic feet per day, as the facility typically fluctuates between 20 and 50 million cubic feet per day, according to the permit application. The loss of natural gas from Las Flores Canyon would have little impact on the consumer, according to

SoCal Gas spokesman Javier Mendoza. "SoCal Gas receives gas from multiple sources and our storage facilities provide additional reserves to help ensure our supply of natural gas is fully sufficient to meet customer demand," Mr. Mendoza said.

For the duration of the permit, the company is proposing that all trucks leaving Las Flores Canyon travel west to the Refugio Road on-ramp on Highway 101 to avoid motor vehicle and pedestrian traffic associated with the El Capitan State Beach Campground.

Standing in opposition to the permit, dozens of county residents gathered Monday on the steps of the county courthouse to urge the county to deny ExxonMobil's request. The demonstration came after officials were notified that the county is legally required to reject the new plan in a letter from Food and Water Watch and the Center for Biological Diversity.

According to the letter, the trucks "carry significant risk of accidents, fiery explosions, injuries, deaths and environmental destruction."

While decisions on how to move the crude in order to continue production are expected by the end of week, cleanup crews and relief efforts on areas impacted by the spill continue.

Nearly half of the 96.5 miles of shoreline assessed by Shoreline Cleanup Assessment Technique teams have met cleanup goals, officials said.

Most of the areas surveyed have less than one percent of oil.

Cleanup on other portions of the shoreline, including cobble and rock areas that require hand crews, and excavation operations in the vicinity of the initial release, will continue until cleanup goals have been met, officials said.

As of Tuesday, a total of 239 animals —156 birds and 83 mammals —have died as a result of the spill.

One-hundred and five animals, including 60 birds and 45 mammals, have been recovered and are receiving treatment.

No live oiled wildlife has been found in the response area since last week, officials said.

Eight vessels remain on the water, and more than 1,000 personnel remain in the field conducting cleanup efforts.

Drivers are reminded of a single-lane closure from 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. in the southbound direction of Highway 101 west of Refugio Beach. Due to heavy equipment operation in the cleanup area, the closure is expected for at least the next two weeks, according to officials.

Camping reservations at El Capitan State Beach and Refugio State Beach parks have been cancelled through June 25 in an effort to expedite clean-up efforts. Campers with reservations during this time will be provided a full refund through Reserve America.

Visitors wanting to find alternative overnight camping opportunities can contact Reserve America at 800-444-7275. For more information on the permitting process, including a link to the ExxonMobil application, go to countyofsb.org.