

The Bakersfield Californian

Environmentalists sue to halt refinery project observers call moot

BY JOHN COX

Thursday, Apr 14, 2016

In case unfavorable market conditions haven't already killed a proposal to reopen the Alon refinery on Rosedale Highway, environmental groups filed a lawsuit this week asking federal officials to challenge the plant's air permits.

The federal lawsuit filed by a coalition including the Sierra Club and the Arizona-based Center for Biological Diversity accuses the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency of neglecting Central Valley residents by failing to oppose permits the San Joaquin Valley Air Pollution Control District issued the refinery in March 2015.

The permits allow the plant's Dallas-based owner, Alon USA Energy Inc., to resume fuel processing and greatly expand the property's existing rail offloading terminal. If the company moves forward with the expansion, it could bring in up to two mile-long train shipments of oil per day.

But Alon has all but abandoned the refinery upgrade and expansion plan. It says it is considering what to do with the unprofitable plant.

Industry observers have pointed to low oil prices and key infrastructure improvements elsewhere in the country, concluding the refinery probably will never reopen, and that the most likely outcome is the plant's gradual dismantling and sale.

Nonetheless, the Center for Biological Diversity said in a news release Wednesday it could resume "at any time." It argues the refinery project would worsen what is already some of the nation's most polluted air.

"The EPA can't opt out of shielding asthmatic children from air pollution just because they live in Bakersfield," CBD attorney Maya Golden-Krasner said in the release.

In an email Thursday, air district Counsel Annette Ballatore-Williamson called the lawsuit a "minor procedural effort" to compel the EPA to take an action it has not taken despite several opportunities to intervene.