

Neighbors want to shut smelly oil facility

Jaimee Lynn Fletcher, Orange County Register, 6-7-10

HUNTINGTON BEACH – After more than a year of the odor of petroleum intermittently wafting into their homes and the sound of clanging metal ringing through their neighborhoods, residents near the Angus Petroleum facility say they want relief.

Residents in the neighborhood near Springfield Avenue and Delaware Street continue to complain to the city and the Southern California Air Quality Management District but say they have yet to see results.

City officials and the AQMD say they have been fielding complaints on the facility but so far Angus has been cooperative and complied with regulations.

The Angus Petroleum facility on California Street had been inactive for nearly 11 years but started work again last summer. Oil production began on the site in 1992 but was shut down in 1998.

Since reopening, Angus has been servicing the oil wells, which is a normal practice for any type of oil well and common in Huntington Beach, Fire Chief Bill Reardon said.

Angus Petroleum officials could not be reached for comment.

Resident Judy Purewal, who has lived in the neighborhood since the 1980s, said nearly 70 families in the community have submitted a petition to get Angus to stop operations but to no avail.

"Our efforts have proved futile so far," Purewal said. "We're downside of the wind... so it blows into our homes and we have to shut our doors and windows just not to smell it."

Last summer residents appealed to the city for help, saying the fumes were causing health issues including headaches and burning eyes. The Fire Department sent a violation notice to Angus Petroleum and said company officials were responsive to residents' concerns.

But neighbors say the problems continue.

Steve Cohn, who has lived on Delaware Street for 10 years, said he worries about the health of his family, especially his newborn baby.

"We just brought a new baby home and she has tiny developing lungs... you just don't want anything to affect her," he said. "When you move to Huntington Beach you expect to live in a residential community, not an industrial wasteland."

Cohn said he has noticed the smell and noise getting worse over the last six to eight months and when he tries to complain in hopes of getting the issue resolved, he hits a road block.

"It's really bad," he said. "It's definitely not under control."

The Southern California Air Quality Management District said they need more than sporadic complaints from residents to call the site a public nuisance and enforce harsher rules, said spokesman Sam Atwood.

While the organization does investigate every complaint filed and issue compliance notices to Angus, they need

to fill hefty criteria in order to take it to the next level, Atwood said.

AQMD has received 120 complaints on Angus since June 2009 and all but two were for odors, Atwood said. He said 60 percent of the complaints were from the same four residents.

"We generally need about six separate households complaining about the same odor incident, on the same day at approximately the same time of day," he said. "Sometimes it can be frustrating for residents because this is a fairly high bar that has to be met in order for AQMD to take action."

AQMD last week did a wall-to-wall inspection of the facility and found Angus Petroleum is complying with regulations, Atwood said.

However, Purewal said the criteria are too hard to follow because ocean breezes blow the smell into different parts of the neighborhood at different times.

"It's very hard to get... six calls in one hour," she said. "The AQMD is working with us on this, but it's a difficult process, these fumes are noxious."

Reardon said the fire department has received about two dozen complaints since Angus Petroleum reopened in 2009 but, as of now, the facility will stay up and running.

"Thus far, AQMD has not issued a shut down order of the facility and only issued several notice to comply violations, which Angus immediately took corrective action on," Reardon said. "Although there have been complaints, there has not been any decision by the city to shut down the facility."

Reardon said he understands residents' concerns and the city is working to ensure Angus Petroleum follows its use permit that was issued by the City Council in 1988.

"I understand their frustrations," he said. "And we take it very seriously."

Angus made headlines earlier this year after the facility was suspected of spilling oil into the Huntington Beach Flood Control Channel during the heavy rains in January.

The 700-gallon spill contaminated the flood channel between Magnolia and Adams streets and infiltrated less than a half-mile of underground storm drains leading to the channel. No oil was leaked into the ocean or into the nearby 150-acre protected wetlands, according to a county report.

Fish and Game officials on Feb. 1 served a search warrant to Angus Petroleum and reported in March that company officials were cooperating with the investigation.

Fish and Game investigators are wrapping up their work and will turn over their findings to the District Attorney's office where it will be decided if charges should be filed and whether to pursue them in state or federal court, officials said.

The Angus oil field has stirred up controversy for Huntington Beach and the neighborhood since its inception. In 1986, a citizens group that opposed the site's operation sued the city and a former councilman after the council approved Angus' plan to drill. The group alleged the project was approved illegally because the councilman named in the suit had conducted business with Angus.

The council recalled Angus' permits and Angus sued the city. The city reached a settlement with Angus, allowing them to drill at the site and the citizens group filed another lawsuit but eventually lost the battle.