

Environmentalists sue to stop Kern County crude oil project

Tony Bizjak, Sacramento Bee, 10-10-14

A coalition of residents and environmental groups has filed a lawsuit challenging Kern County's approval last month of what would be the largest crude-by-rail project in the state.

Kern officials unanimously gave the OK in September to the Alon USA refining company to transform a mothballed Bakersfield refinery into a combination refinery and receiving station for trains transporting crude oil from out of state.

It would be the largest crude-by-rail transfer station in California, twice the size of a similar facility being planned in the Bay Area city of Benicia by the Valero Refining Co. Potentially, the Bakersfield station could receive trains carrying flammable Bakken oil from North Dakota through Central Valley cities, including Sacramento.

The lawsuit, filed by Earthjustice, contends the county did not fully assess the project's health risks to state residents. Those risks, Earthjustice says, include the possibility of explosions if trains derail enroute to the refinery. The lawsuit argues that the project will further degrade air quality in the San Joaquin Valley and cited the region's high levels of pediatric asthma.

"Restarting a shuttered oil refinery is a huge step backwards for cleaning up some of the worst polluted air in the nation. This project will only exacerbate asthma and other respiratory illnesses that already plague Bakersfield residents and children at extraordinarily high rates," said Gordon Nipp, vice chairman of the local Kern-Kaweah Chapter of the Sierra Club, which is a plaintiff in the case.

Kern County officials could not immediately be reached for comment. The county conducted what it described as a comprehensive environmental review before approving the project, and expressed confidence that the transports would be conducted safely.

Last month, Earthjustice sued the Sacramento Metropolitan Air Quality Management District for allowing a smaller crude oil transfer facility to begin operations last year at McClellan Business Park without conducting an environmental review beforehand.