

County supervisors deny Pacific Coast Energy's request for new oil wells

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The county Board of Supervisors voted 3-2 to deny an appeal by Pacific Coast Energy Company to add 88 new cyclic steaming wells to the company's oil drilling project on Orcutt Hill.

Steve Lavagnino, 5th District supervisor, called the Nov. 1 decision a "sad day for Santa Barbara County," and essentially a "drilling moratorium" for the county, because "if you're not going to allow drilling on Orcutt Hill, then forget it. It's not going to happen anywhere."

Pacific Coast Energy Company (PCEC) had originally requested to add 96 wells to the drilling site, which was voted down by the board in July. The company returned in October with an appeal, offering to exclude drilling in the Careaga Tar Zone, which is strongly associated with oil seeps. PCEC also offered to mitigate effects on endangered plant and animal species in the area by setting aside a 21-acre preservation for the California tiger salamander and funding a \$125,000 research program for the Lompoc yerba santa.

But those compromises didn't cut it. After dozens of impassioned public comments both for and against PCEC's proposed project, 2nd District Supervisor Janet Wolf moved to deny the appeal and make findings for approval of the "seep can only" alternative to the project. Wolf was joined by 1st District Supervisor Salud Carbajal and 3rd District Supervisor Doreen Farr in voting to pass her motion. Lavagnino and 4th District Supervisor Peter Adam voted against it.

Wolf cited previous oil seeps, which release crude oil into the ground surface and threaten nearby sensitive species, as a factor in her opposition to the project. Though excluding the Careaga Tar Zone was expected to mitigate those oil seeps, the project would still have Class I environmental impacts, which are "significant and unavoidable." Wolf claimed these impacts would not be outweighed by potential economic benefits.

"I can't find a significant or overriding financial benefit for this proposal," Wolf said prior to making her motion. "I've sat on this board during the times we've had those emergency permits for seep cans. Every time those come in front of us, it's dismaying and disheartening to me."

Seep cans are temporary receptacles placed into the ground to collect and contain oil from seeps to prevent it from spreading and damaging the nearby environment. The "seep can only alternative" of PCEC's project would permit the installation of seep cans in the future, but prohibit any additional wells on the drilling site.

Farr said she would vote in opposition because PCEC has a history of violating permits with the county and conditions from the Division of Oil, Gas, and Geothermal Resources.

"For me, it's not at all a good history, not at all a good story to be able to tell," Farr said before voting.

Carbajal agreed, saying that while he wanted to vote for a project that would create high-paying jobs for county residents, he was “forced to lean toward the seep can only alternative.”

Lavagnino, on the other hand, spoke strongly in favor of the project, as did Adam. Lavagnino said that PCEC made unmatched compromises on the project to mitigate environmental effects, and that the economic benefits of the project would “dwarf” those reaped by home building projects and others.

“I thought this applicant went above and beyond what was needed, and I think once again we continue to move the goal post away,” Lavagnino said at the meeting. “If you don’t have the help of the powerful, you cannot help the powerless. That’s what allows you to help the powerless.”

Even so, the board made its vote, and Orcutt Hill won’t be seeing additional cyclic steaming wells from PCEC any time soon.