

Why Some Enviros Back T-Ridge Oil Project

Linda Krop, Calbuzz, 12-22-09

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For over 30 years, the Environmental Defense Center has been among the state's leading advocates in the battle to end oil drilling along our magnificent coast. That's why we're so excited about the landmark agreement we negotiated on behalf of environmental groups in Santa Barbara County to phase out offshore oil production.

Like so many other issues misrepresented in today's highly charged political climate, the Tranquillon Ridge proposal has been co-opted by some who seek to use it for their own political gain. That's too bad because this agreement will finally bring an end to California offshore oil drilling.

Despite our efforts and successes along the way, there are still too many platforms drilling for oil off our coast. Pressure for more leasing abounds. In the 21st Century, we need to find new and innovative ways to solve old problems. With the Tranquillon Ridge agreement, we have found the way to do just that. That's why this agreement is supported by a broad spectrum of groups — for whom coming together is a rare occurrence.

We recognize that there are nay-sayers and those who are nervous about any approach that falls short of removing all offshore oil drilling NOW. But the reality is that no matter how much we want to pull these rigs from the ocean, we don't have the legal authority or the support of any administration — Democrat or Republican — to achieve that goal.

So, we've found a way to get something through a negotiated agreement that we could not achieve in any other forum: an agreed termination date for four of the major oil rigs drilling off our shores. Currently these platforms operate without any end date, and can continue drilling for several more decades.

Under the agreement, three of the platforms would be shut down in nine years. The fourth platform would follow five years later. All related onshore processing facilities would be removed. In addition, hundreds of acres of onshore oil wells would be shut down. And as a further bonus, the agreement requires PXP to reduce and offset all of its greenhouse gas emissions and provide approximately 4,000 acres of land to the public for permanent conservation. No new construction or facilities would be permitted.

This agreement is a total win-win for the environment. It will not only put an end to existing drilling operations, but will also provide the greatest protection against new federal leasing in California. The four platforms that will be shut down pose the biggest threat for new leasing along our coast because they can be used to access known reserves and are supported by existing infrastructure, making new drilling both attractive and economically profitable. Shutting down these platforms and removing the onshore facilities assures that they are not available for future oil leasing and development.

The signal this agreement will send is that California is serious about getting rid of offshore oil and willing to go the extra mile to make it happen. That's why this agreement is endorsed by 20 major environmental groups in Santa Barbara County as well as our pro-environment County Supervisors, City Council members and Congresswoman Lois Capps.

The claim that such an agreement is not enforceable is misguided and wrong. While the Feds (through the Minerals Management Service, known as MMS) can fine a company for failing to continue production when there is still “profitable” oil in the ground (and thus royalties available to the government), a contract to end drilling (guaranteed under this agreement) is an enforceable contract.

It is not often that we have an opportunity to be creative and progressive in dealing with such a pressing issue facing the people of California. Rhetoric that suggests that we who support this agreement are somehow in favor of oil development is cynical and untrue, and does nothing to address the real issue of continued drilling off our shores.

This agreement is an example of what we can do when people work together in an innovative way. While we on the environmental protection side have been able to win most of our battles, this approach gives us a way to end the war.

This is not an either-or situation to be pursued at the exclusion of additional approaches. An oil extraction tax, for example, is one way to help solve California’s budget woes, but it will do nothing to end offshore oil production. We need to have a variety of approaches to addressing our economic needs while protecting our environment. The proposal for an oil extraction tax can, and should, go hand in hand with a plan to stop oil drilling offshore.

We look forward to the opportunity to explain the benefits of this unique proposal, and address any concerns, should this matter be reconsidered by the State Lands Commission.