

# Earth First! protests environmental support of oil drilling

Colby Frazier, Santa Barbara Daily Sound, 2-16-10

A dozen or so members of the environmental organization Earth First! gathered at an entrance to the Paseo Nuevo mall yesterday to protest the endorsement by several local environmental groups of the Tranquillon Ridge oil drilling project.

The Earth First activists took aim at the drilling project's biggest environmental cheerleader, the Environmental Defense Center (EDC).

"We have to stop environmental endorsing of drilling before it's too late," yelled Carleigh, one of the protest organizers who declined to give her last name, who noted that she felt EDC's support for the project amounts to "green washing."

The proposed project, which would be carried out by Plains Exploration and Production (PXP), aims to tap the oil-rich Tranquillon Ridge off the coast of Lompoc. The company would tap into the oil reserve, which is located in state waters, by slant drilling new wells from Platform Irene, located in federal waters.

EDC and the group Get Oil Out! both blessed the project, but only after EDC officials helped broker a secret deal with the oil company. In exchange for environmental support, PXP agreed to prematurely shut down three offshore drilling sites off Point Arguello, shut two onshore facilities in Lompoc and on the Gaviota Coast and donate thousands of acres of land to the public. In addition, PXP also agreed to mitigate all greenhouse emissions created by the project and donate \$1.5 million to the county to further reduce pollution.

EDC officials lauded the concessions as a big step toward ending offshore drilling off the California Coast.

Despite the rare support of environmental groups, the State Lands Commission, citing concerns with the project's enforceability, struck down the project last year.

But in recent months, as the state's economic situation has worsened, the project and its potential to line state coffers with as much as \$1 billion over its 14-year life, has been resurrected.

EDC officials have said publicly that they're working to craft another deal with PXP, though it's unclear when the new project would be reviewed. And if the project moves forward with anything but a pre-negotiated deal with environmental groups, EDC officials have said they wouldn't support it.

Attempts to reach an EDC official for comment yesterday was not successful.

While many environmental organizations clearly feel that the deal is a solid long-term solution to stomping out offshore oil production, others, like Earth First!, feel compromising with oil companies is the wrong path.

"We think that the compromise is absolutely unacceptable," Carleigh said.

The Earth First! protest was the culmination of a weeklong retreat that took place in Santa Barbara County, and drew environmentalists from as far as Florida, Carleigh said.

The crux of the Earth First! message was, "No compromise."

“We’re not saying EDC is bad,” said Darwin Bondgrahn. “We think they made a big mistake and need to come back to the side of the environmental movement of no compromise.”

Panagioti Tsoikas, an Earth First! member, traveled from Florida to protest EDC’s involvement. He said the battle against drilling in Santa Barbara mirrors one that environmentalists in Florida are fighting. Legislators there could soon contemplate lifting a 20-year ban on offshore drilling.

Tsoikas said he fears new oil drilling would only encourage more fossil fuel use, which would contribute to global warming and potentially put places like the Everglades under water.

Carleigh criticized the sincerity of PXP and its offer to take three offshore rigs offline years before they originally would have been forced to. She cited Santa Barbara County documents that show the three rigs hit peak production years ago and are on their way out anyhow.

“If I were PXP I would want to get out of these platforms anyway,” said Bondgrahn.

The activists held signs and passed out pamphlets. One sign, written on a yellow road construction-style sign, read: “Caution, oil spill courtesy of EDC.”

Many of the Earth First! members said they hope to see more environmental groups retreat to their traditional stance of being opposed to oil drilling.

Bondgrahn said PXP’s past agreement with EDC, and any future agreement for new wells, represents a strange contradiction.

“Why are we in this position to sell out the environment in order to save the environment?” he asked. “It doesn’t make sense to us.”