

Offshore drilling project still alive

Eric Lindberg, Santa Barbara Daily Sound, 2-11-10

Local environmental groups responded to news that a state budget subcommittee is considering a move to breathe new life into an offshore oil-drilling project near Lompoc by issuing a statement opposed to the plan.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger brought the oil project back to the table last month to the delight of some who say the offshore drilling plan could pump more than \$1 billion into state coffers during the next 14 years.

In exchange for being allowed to slant drill into an oil-rich area in state waters off the coast, Plains Exploration and Production (PXP) would shut down several drilling sites at a specified date, in addition to a handful of other concessions.

While the Environmental Defense Center, Get Oil Out! and Citizens Planning Association backed the Tranquillon Ridge project last year after forging the agreement with PXP, representatives from the groups reiterated yesterday they are opposed to any budget plan that would circumvent normal approval channels.

The deal between the enviros and PXP was shot down last year by the State Lands Commission, which cited concerns about the enforceability of the agreement.

The environmental groups submitted testimony to the budget subcommittee urging it to hold off on considering the plan, as they are working on a new deal with PXP.

“The groups ... are very close to finalizing a new agreement that addresses the concerns of the State Lands Commission and several environmental organizations to assure greater enforceability, transparency and accountability, now that the ‘old’ settlement agreement has no effect,” according to a news release from the Environmental Defense Center (EDC). “Once the new plan is finalized, it will be made public and will hopefully be reheard by the State Lands Commission.”

EDC officials also noted they joined other organizations to oppose a proposal by the governor during budget talks last year to revive the oil project that would have effectively skirted the usual approval process.

“The groups also oppose Governor Schwarzenegger’s current attempt to link the project with any particular funding source,” according to the news release. “Rather, they support existing law, which provides that moneys from oil drilling are to be deposited into the state’s general fund.”

Meanwhile, State Sen. Abel Maldonado, of Santa Maria, is in the midst of confirmation hearings for the post of lieutenant governor, which would give him a seat on the three-member State Lands Commission.

Maldonado, who would represent the swing vote on the oil-drilling plan, recently told members of the press that he would vote against the project if confirmed and the plan returns to the commission, according to published reports.

Under the original deal, the Tranquillon Ridge project would allow PXP to drill new wells from Platform Irene, a federal oil platform, into state waters.

In exchange, the company would end production at Platform Irene by 2022 and three other rigs off Point

Arguello by 2017, in addition to shutting down two onshore facilities in Lompoc and on the Gaviota Coast, and donating thousands of acres of land to the public.

Plains also agreed to mitigate all greenhouse gas emissions created by the project and donate \$1.5 million to the county to further reduce pollution.