

# Oil-drilling plan draws opposition

April Charlton, Santa Maria Times, 1-17-10

The Huasna Valley east of Arroyo Grande is not a place to drill for oil.

That was the resounding message delivered during a recent environmental scoping meeting for a proposed oil exploration project in the valley.

“This is not a typical site,” said Baback Naficy, local environmental law attorney.

Naficy said the Huasna Valley is undeveloped, rural land that needs to be protected, and is not an area suitable for oil production.

Excelaron LLC, a subsidiary of Australian Oil Co., is again requesting a conditional-use permit from San Luis Obispo County to allow for oil exploration and production on the 5,000-acre Mankins Ranch in Huasna Valley.

The company wants to drill up to four test wells on the site and an additional eight wells if the test wells are productive. The proposed project also includes construction of a production facility.

Last year, Excelaron withdrew its application to drill on the Mankins Ranch after pressure from residents to require a full environmental impact report (EIR) for the project.

After withdrawing the proposal, the company agreed to fund an EIR, which the county will prepare, and resubmitted its plans to drill last summer.

Thursday’s environmental scoping meeting in front of the county Planning Commission was the first step in preparing an EIR for the proposed project, which some, like Naficy, don’t believe can be fully mitigated.

Naficy said it’s really important for the EIR “to appreciate the context in which this project is being proposed.”

He also said at some point the county will have to decide whether Excelaron’s proposal is worth the impacts it will have on the environment.

Huasna Valley is known for its agricultural land that has been farmed and ranched for decades, as well as the beauty of the quiet, open space.

Many longtime residents who spoke at the scoping meeting echoed Naficy’s comments and said the EIR has to adequately address water issues and the noise the project would bring to the valley.

“Background noises in the valley aren’t like the background noises in the city,” said Lynn Schultz, Huasna Valley resident. “Sometimes on a cold night, you can hear nothing.”

The area also has a limited water supply that could be impacted by drilling, which some residents believe could never be mitigated.

“We have a very fragile water supply,” said Susan Pilge. “Any potential for pollution of our groundwater (can’t be mitigated).”

Residents also are concerned about traffic impacts and fire hazards.

Comments on the scope and content for the EIR are due by 5 p.m. Feb. 16. Send comments to John McKenzie, San Luis Obispo County Department of Planning and Building, 976 Osos St., Room 300, San Luis Obispo, CA 93408-2040, or e-mail [jdmckenzie@co.slo.ca.us](mailto:jdmckenzie@co.slo.ca.us).