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Sound LNG Plant Nearer

Agency Says Project Is Safe For Sea Life

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January 12, 2008. A federal agency Friday came a step closer to approving the Broadwater natural gas plant in Long Island Sound, issuing a report that says the project would have no significant impact on the environment.

The project's backers praised the report as a victory for energy consumers, but opponents are hoping that an imminent decision by New York state officials will deep-six the project.

"All eyes are on [New York Gov. Eliot] Spitzer right now," said Adrienne Esposito, executive director of the Citizens Campaign for the Environment, a New York environmental group. "The issue is what will he do; if he says no, we're good."

After three years of reviews, staff at the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission issued a final environmental impact statement Friday that lists 86 recommended mitigation measures the agency says will keep Broadwater from seriously harming sea life and the air and water of the Sound.

The agency's staff says the project is the best alternative to fill a growing need for energy in New York and Connecticut.

The report set off a harsh battle of words between opponents who fear that the plant will damage the environment and pose a safety hazard and proponents who argue that the region needs this new source of energy.

"The Broadwater project would be a travesty — the complete desecration of Connecticut's environmental crown jewel and a total setback to the decades we have spent improving water quality and habitat in the Sound," Gov. M. Jodi Rell said. "Connecticut will fight this reckless decision every step of the way."

John Hritcko, Broadwater senior vice president, shot back: "It's concerning that Gov. Rell would make a statement today that reflects a complete lack of understanding of the Broadwater proposal, given that her own state's energy plan recommends siting of future LNG facilities in the state.

"The issue deserves a more thoughtful response."

Hritcko said the company still needs to pore over the details of the 2,220-page report, but called it "a significant step forward in the process."

Next, the five-member energy regulatory commission will decide whether to approve the project, one of dozens of LNG facilities being considered along the East Coast. Spokeswoman Tamara Young-Allen could not say on Friday when the panel will vote.

Broadwater faces a more immediate decision in New York: The Department of State there has until Feb. 12 to decide whether the project fits with the state's Coastal Zone Management Plan, one of several permits required from New York.

Broadwater, a joint venture of TransCanada and Shell US Gas and Power, wants to tether a 1,200-foot-long vessel to a pylon 9 miles north of Wading River, Long Island, in New York waters. The facility would be about 10.5 miles from Connecticut. The barge would take in super-cooled liquefied natural gas from huge tankers, warm it back to a gas and pump it through about 30 miles of pipe to New York and Connecticut.

The company contends that the project would save residential customers hundreds of dollars a year in energy costs. The Northeast, increasingly reliant on natural gas as a cleaner fuel than coal or oil, gets most of its gas through pipelines running from the Gulf of Mexico and Canada. But that supply is projected to decline.

The energy agency's staff report says Broadwater would provide "a local supply of natural gas that uses existing distribution facilities."

Opponents say the gas would not be local at all, noting that it would be imported from countries across the Atlantic. They also contend that Broadwater's cost figures fail to take into account the true environmental cost of LNG.

They argue that the region needs to focus more on conservation and developing renewable energy sources. The agency's report concludes that alternative energy sources could not meet the expected growth in demand.

Paul Afonso, executive director of the New England Energy Alliance, a group of suppliers and trade groups, said the energy agency's report "is good news for New England energy consumers."

He said approval of Broadwater and another proposal off the coast of Gloucester, Mass., would "improve the security of supply and price flexibility for energy providers."

Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal, a longtime opponent, called the project an environmental atrocity and vowed Friday to take the federal energy commission to court. He even threatened to sue Spitzer and New York if that state gives Broadwater the OK.

Blumenthal earlier this week urged New York to reject Broadwater on the grounds that a newly announced proposal to put a different LNG facility 20 miles off the New Jersey shore is a safer and less environmentally harmful option.

Spitzer has been tight-lipped about the project. A request for comment from his office went unanswered Friday.

Esposito, of the Citizens Campaign for the Environment, noted that the New York Department of Environmental Conservation has sent a letter to the energy commission listing such concerns as the possible impact on lobsters and fin fish, water quality and recreational values — a possible sign of where New York officials are leaning.

"The bottom line is FERC is only looking out for energy interests," she said. "We need Gov. Rell and Gov. Spitzer to look out for the public's interest."

U.S. Rep. Joe Courtney, D-2nd District, said the staff's recommendation "is a complete abdication of the FERC's role to protect the public's interest. The negative consequences will reverberate for decades if it is ultimately built."

U.S. Rep. Rosa DeLauro, D-3rd District, echoed his sentiments and pointed out another issue: safety.

The Coast Guard has said the project can be safely operated and protected, given the right conditions. This includes establishing broad security zones around the facility and the tankers that would supply it. But whether that agency has the resources for the job is in question.

A Government Accountability Office study out this week says the Coast Guard "lacks the resources it needs to implement their own mitigation measures," DeLauro said Friday afternoon in a prepared statement.

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Visit www.courant.com/broadwater to read Gov. M. Jodi Rell's statement on the Broadwater decision.

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