



Lowering the boom

Port of St. Helens' commissioners approve controversial oil regulations for Port Westward

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In a packed hearing at the St. Helens Public Library on Dec. 12, commissioners of the Port of St. Helens voted unanimously to allow oil company Global Partners to handle a much wider variety of oil products through its Port Westward facility in Clatskanie. Global Partners, through its subsidiary, Cascade Kelly Holdings LLC, owns the Columbia Pacific Bio-Refinery at the Port Westward terminal.

The decision paves the way for a significant oil export business on the Columbia River, as well as more mile-long oil trains traveling on both sides of the Columbia River Gorge through both Portland and Vancouver. With this change the Clatskanie facility is also connected to both the bakken oil fields of North Dakota and the tar sands mines of Canada.

The vote was strongly criticized by local residents, who complain the decision was rushed and voices were not heard.

"The idea of polluting the Columbia River with thousands of gallons of crude makes me want to throw up," said Nancy Ward, a local resident and president of Clean Columbia County. "If they really wanted an inclusive process they would have called for a public meeting, or town hall, or some forum for public input. Listing it as a simple agenda item meant it wasn't a secret but it also did little to shine a light on the critical nature of the issue."

On Nov. 14, the Port of St. Helens heard a public presentation from Global Partners that asked them to lift all restrictions on the API gravity of oils handled at the port. API gravity, or specific gravity, is an inverse measure that is used to determine the weight of petroleum liquids in comparison to water. When Global Partners purchased the port operation in 2013, the property came with an API limit of 30 to 44. Oil floats at API gravity of 10 and higher.

At their next meeting on Nov. 28, Port

commissioners came prepared to vote on a resolution that would scale back these restrictions, but decided to delay for two weeks after hearing strong concerns from local residents and city officials. The vote on Dec. 12 lowered the weight range to API 18-44, which translates to heavier oil.

Testifying on behalf of the St. Helens city council on Dec. 12, Mayor Rick Scholl asked commissioners to conduct a comprehensive rail impact study before approving any modifications to their lease with Global Partners, observing that the length of trains shipped to Global Partners exceeded any other rail user, closing many intersections in St. Helens – a community only a mile and a half long.

"We had testimony, over two hours of passionate testimony from Scappoose, to Warren, to St. Helens, Columbia City – nowhere on there was it on my agenda, and yet everybody was heard, and taken into consideration," said Scholl.

St. Helens Council President Doug Morten was next to address the commissioners, focusing his opening remarks on the issue of "good governance".

"Looking at our council, the only poor decisions, and the bad decisions that we've made (is) because we had time pressure, and we had to make that decision. I just took note that you guys are going to go out and make a decision this morning, and that's ... wow ... I hope everyone has the opportunity to air their opinion."

Commissioners said they supported Global Partners' request because the company required greater flexibility to succeed. This message was echoed by Global employees. One employee in charge of maintenance at the facility told commissioners "I am definitely for what we're doing out there at the Port, whether Global owns us or not," adding "We are not going to do something out there that is unsafe for us and our family. We are trying to take care of our families, and this is the best we can do at this time."

An hour and a half later, the Port

commissioners ended their meeting with a line of people still waiting to testify, and Commissioner Chris Iverson threatening to have one man arrested for demanding they postpone the vote until everyone had a chance to speak.

"There were lots of people, pro and con, who wanted to speak and weren't allowed to speak, and to me that's not how democracy should work," said Brady Preheim of Scappoose. According to Preheim many people at the Port's Nov. 28 hearing were also not able to testify.

Speaking after the hearing about the resolution, Commissioner Larry Erickson remarked, "There's just nothing wonderful I can say about it. I just can't." He later added, "I will amend what I said. There is one good thing I'll say about it – in regards to the very happy people in Clatskanie who get to keep their jobs. So that's the good thing."

API questions and safety concerns

At their Nov. 28 hearing, Port officials promised not to allow oils under an API gravity of 10. Lower numbers of gravity mean heavier oil. The port officials claimed this would ensure that any oil spilled would not sink into the Columbia River, and would mean less risk of fire and explosion.

At the Port's Dec. 12 meeting, one retired DEQ official, Greg Pettit, explained how heavy tar sands oil of API 10 must be mixed with other chemicals for shipment – raising its API rating and increasing its flammability while in transit. Scott Smith, a spill contingency planner with DEQ, also testified to the commission that these mixed chemicals separate or "divorce" when oil spills – allowing heavier oils to sink while lighter substances float. For Pettit, this makes diluted bitumen in the approved range "the worst of both worlds."

Smith told commissioners that not much could be said in general about the safety or composition of these substances. "There's a

lot of ways to alter the chemistry of oil," Smith said. "Every spill with crude oil is kind of unique."

According to Smith, a spill of diluted bitumen in the lower ranges "would probably be something like the (2010) Kalamazoo River in Michigan. And in that spill, the clean-up took years." The Kalamazoo spill was also one of the largest and most expensive inland oil spills in U.S. history – due in part to the behavior of diluted bitumen, which Smith emphasized was extremely sticky and difficult to locate under water. Smith also told the commission there were many unknowns with regard to the handling or cleaning of heavy oils, and that these issues would have to be considered in the facility's oil spill response plan – currently set to expire in August 2019.

"The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality hasn't developed rules for submerged oils yet. I wish we had," said Smith.

Oil and public process in the Northwest

The process governing oil trains to Oregon has unfolded very differently than the one in Washington state. One oil facility in Vancouver was studied for four and a half years and received 289,000 public comments before it was rejected by Washington Gov. Jay Inslee. Three more terminals proposed in Gray's Harbor were also defeated after receiving more than 100,000 public comments.

But commissioners at the Port of St. Helens gave the public 28 days from start to finish before voting on API changes that could have ripple effects across Columbia County and in cities all along both the BNSF rail line in Washington and the Union Pacific rail line in Oregon. Commissioners were even prepared to vote two weeks earlier before hearing from city officials critical of

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