

Coos Bay fishermen brace for LNG, channel projects

Big changes possible for coast

By JES BURNS
Oregon Public Broadcasting

COOS BAY — The headland that looks out over the ocean entrance to Coos Bay has been given a rather descriptive name by local fishermen.

“We call it Chickenshit Point,” says Nick Edwards, chuckling.

Perhaps it’s because the people watching from up on the hill aren’t considered as brave as those on the boats crossing the dangerous Coos Bay bar below.

“A lot of us will come up here and watch. Everybody goes, ‘He’s made it across the bar. He’s made it across the bar!’” he says.

But more likely, it’s that when conditions are bad enough to make crossing the bar a spectator sport, it’s safe to say it’s all just gone to crap.

Every year in Oregon, fishermen die on bars like this one. Ocean swells push up as the water get shallower entering the bay. And then at its worst, an outgoing tide, funneled through the narrow entrance, undercuts the waves, making them break. Add high wind, rain and cold water and conditions deteriorate even further. Boats can capsize or smash into the jetties and anyone thrown into the water is in serious danger.

In 2016, five fishermen on three vessels died within line of sight of this point.

The bar is dangerous enough on its own with the traffic from the Charleston-based commercial fishing fleet — the third-largest in Oregon. But if the Jordan Cove liquefied natural gas export terminal is built, there will be 120 more ships a year — 240 transits in all — in competition to cross the bar at slack high tide — the safest time to make the transit. Add to that the additional shipping traffic that the Port of Coos Bay hopes to attract with a major channel-widening project and the entrance to the bay could get crowded.

Edwards is owner of the trawler Carter Jon and makes his living on pink shrimp and Dungeness crab. For him, the shipping traffic connected to the Jordan Cove terminal is the most immediate concern.

“You only have a small area to come through — less than about half of a tenth of a mile. So when we’re inbound and they’re outbound, with a zone that they want to have at 500 meters, you actually can’t have both people cross the bar,” he says.

The Coast Guard will maintain a security zone around LNG vessels — the ships that transport liquefied natural gas. With that in consideration, Jordan Cove estimates the impact to nearby ships in the bay would last 20 to 30 minutes.

That’s a long time for a fishing crew to be stuck out in a stormy ocean waiting their turn to cross the bar.

Bay safety

Last spring, the Coast Guard issued a letter of recommendation for the Jordan Cove project saying it “recommended to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission, also known as FERC, that the waterway in its current state be con-



Jes Burns/Oregon Public Broadcasting

Shrimper and clammer Seth Smith harvests cockles from a mudflat in Coos Bay.

sidered suitable for LNG marine traffic associated with this project.”

The Coast Guard would develop an LNG Vessel Transit Management Plan before the port receives its first LNG carrier.

Other groups will also be coordinating to ensure safety, said Port of Coos Bay CEO John Burns. These include the harbor pilots who would be responsible for guiding the shipping vessels into port and a new Harbor Safety Committee formed by the port. The port is also planning to create a vessel traffic information system — a sort of air traffic control for the bay.

“VTIS are generally set up in ports where there’s either significant numbers of vessels coming in and out or ... the harbor conditions are such that you want to make sure that somebody’s got an eye on what’s happening out there — and nobody’s being put into a detrimental situation,” Burns said.

But in the meantime, Edwards is waiting to hear details from the Coast Guard about what exactly the security zone around LNG ships will entail.

According to the project’s draft environmental impact statement, “The Coast Guard has informed Jordan Cove that the degree of security zone enforcement would be based on the threat level in effect at the time and the specific perceived threat of any vessel in the security zone.”

But in the same document, the security zone decisions are characterized as “pending.”

If the security zone is deemed an “exclusion zone,” then no boats or ships will be allowed within a certain perimeter around the LNG tanker.

But Edwards says that’s not really necessary in a place like Coos Bay.

“We’ve been fishing here for ... 38 years and we passed ships, tugs and barges all the time,” he said.

Edwards says he’s been pushing for a softer approach.

“What we would like to see in this area is to have a safety zone,” Edwards said. “A safety zone that vessels take a precautionary approach with the ship coming in, you know, give the ship a wide berth, espe-

cially going through the jet-ties right here.”

He says this would help alleviate dangerous situations on the bar. And in the months to come, he wants to make sure his boat and the rest of the Charleston fishing fleet aren’t put in danger by a new nautical neighbor.

“The fishing industry and LNG have to figure out how both industries are going to work together,” he says.

Dredging

Working together would be essential if Jordan Cove and the Port of Coos Bay’s separate project to deepen and widen the shipping channel go forward, the goal of which is to increase the size and overall number of vessels entering the port.

The Federal Energy Regulatory Commission is expected to issue a final decision on the Jordan Cove LNG terminal and pipeline project early next year.

The Coos Bay Channel widening project is not as far along in the regulatory process. Earlier this month, the port hit the “90% design” milestone in completing their permit application. A U.S. Army Corps of Engineers spokesman said they don’t expect to have the draft environmental impact statement completed until March 2020.

Burns says the channel-widening project is the next big step for the port, which hopes to attract larger vessels and more shipping traffic overall.

“If we were going to be an international player we’ve got to be able to at least bring in ships of that size,” Burns said. “Otherwise, we will not be competitive with other ports on the West Coast.”

The project would significantly widen and deepen a little more than 8 miles of the Coos Bay shipping channel. Currently, the channel is 300 feet wide and 37 feet deep. The new plan would widen the channel to 450 feet and 45 feet deep. The spoils would be dumped at a site offshore.

Jordan Cove has been the primary private financial backer of the channel-widening so far, contributing more than \$15 million to the port for project design since 2016.

And local opponents of both projects have argued that because Jordan Cove seems to be so intertwined with the Port as the projects have moved forward, the environmental impacts should be considered holistically. Both the port and Jordan Cove see each other as natural partners, but maintain the projects are independent.

“That’s the whole point of them wanting to widen it, it’s to make the bay, the port available to larger vessels,” said Bruce Moore, Jordan Cove construction manager in Coos Bay. “So as a user of the port would we see a benefit in that? Yes. But is it necessary for us to operate? No.”

Regardless, the physical characteristics of Coos Bay would change significantly if the projects go through. The port’s proposed channel-widening project would remove enough earth to fill a football field-sized skyscraper the height of Mount Bachelor. Add the fill Jordan Cove needs to remove for its project, and that shaft of earth rises higher than Mount Hood.

Federal environmental reports for Jordan Cove and a previous Coos Bay dredging project characterize the ecological, water quality and hydrologic impacts as temporary and within reasonable limits.

To make up for the environmental impacts of its project on the bay, includ-

ing the destruction of an eel grass bed where the terminal berth will be dug, Jordan Cove has mitigation projects planned. It plans to plant eel grass at a site near the airport. Jordan Cove is also planning a larger project further up river, where it will be converting a golf course back to a tidal wetland designed to create habitat for juvenile coho salmon.

Still there are concerns. Another section of Coos Bay, called South Slough, has lost a substantial amount of its eel grass — with two eel grass sites in the slough disappearing totally in 2016.

Mike Graybill, retired manager of South Slough National Estuarine Research Reserve, questions any project that will wipe out even more of the important marine life habitat.

“Now there’s a proposal to dig up a bunch of eel grass to make a new (Jordan Cove) berth. They’ll do an eel grass mitigation project — but there’s something larger going on in the bay,” he said.





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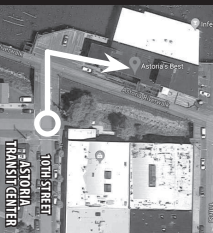
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