

Developers call off Kalama methanol project

By TROY BRYNELSON
and DAVID STEVES
Oregon Public Broadcasting

Developers appear to be calling it quits on a long-planned and controversial proposal to build a \$2 billion methanol plant on the banks of the lower Columbia River.

The Port of Kalama announced Friday that the developer, NW Innovation Works, had terminated its lease, effectively ending the project. It would have converted fracked natural gas into methanol to be shipped to Asia.

Like many industrial fossil fuel plans in the region in recent years, the plant had fomented debate over whether it could deliver jobs and economic vitality to Kalama, which straddles Interstate 5 about 40 miles north of Portland — or whether its potential to spew greenhouse gases caused more harm than good.

In a statement, port officials laid blame on state regulators and Washington Gov. Jay Inslee for “killing local, sustainable jobs just when the need is the greatest.” The port had claimed building the facility would have put 1,400 builders to work in construction, then provide 200 jobs to onsite employees.

“Jay Inslee stood on Kalama’s waterfront to tout the climate benefits of the project, then turned on us when he ran for president,” said Port Director Mark Wilson in the statement, referring to Inslee’s short-lived campaign for the 2020 Democratic presidential nomination.

Meanwhile, opponents cheered the separation. Diane Dick, a Cowlitz County resident and activist, said she felt “ecstatic” after years of fighting. She also fought a proposed oil-train terminal at the Port of Vancouver, which halted plans in 2018, and said she continues to fight a proposed coal terminal in Longview.

“I think the tide has turned on allowing greenhouse gas-emitting projects to go forward,” Dick said.

First proposed in 2014, the methanol refinery would have turned fracked natural



NW Innovation Works

The site at the Port of Kalama where NW Innovation Works had proposed a 90-acre methanol plant.

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Diane Dick | Cowlitz County resident and activist

gas from Canada into methanol. The methanol then would be shipped to China to make plastics. Proposed plans also included a 3-mile pipeline for transporting natural gas.

With NW Innovation Works’ pitch that methanol could replace other, more car-

bon-emitting fossil fuels emitted elsewhere in the world, the project initially garnered support. In 2015, Inslee told a crowd he felt the project “bodes well for Washington’s future.” By 2019, however, he came to oppose it and other fossil fuel proposals.

Around the same time, new information started to cast doubt on the project’s promise. Oregon Public Broadcasting first reported in 2019 that the company had suggested to potential investors that its methanol could be sold as fuel in China, contradicting its public statements the methanol would be exclusively used to help make plastics.

Had the plant been built, regulators said it would have been one of the top 10 greenhouse gas emitters in Washington state. In December, the Washington Department of Ecology found it would have fumed almost 1 million metric tons of carbon dioxide into the air each year.

The project ran into regulatory difficulty a month later. In January, the Washington Department of Ecology denied a necessary shoreline permit, citing the greenhouse gas emissions. The denial ultimately led to NW Innovation Works’ recent decision, the company said in a statement.

“In light of the recent Washington Department of Ecology’s decision to deny the (permit), the regulatory environment has become unclear and unpredictable,” NW Innovation Works said in a statement. Julie McIvor, a marketing coordinator, told OPB on Friday the company would not answer follow-up questions.

Still, both the port and the company had appeared prepared for a long push. Days after the permit denial, the two agreed on a three-year lease extension for the company’s offices at the port, The Daily News reported.

Environmental groups applauded its apparent demise. The Center for Biological Diversity wrote in a statement the plant was “a disaster waiting to happen.” Brett VandenHeuvel, executive director of Columbia Riverkeeper, said activists will continue to battle fossil fuel projects in the Pacific Northwest.

“Our region will continue to be threatened by fossil fuel projects, I have no doubt,” he said. “They want to continue to frack and drill and mine. And, you know, our communities are here to stand up to that.”

Oregon will allow homeless to sleep on public property

By NICOLE HAYDEN
The Oregonian

Oregon communities must rewrite local rules to allow Oregonians to sit, lie, sleep and keep warm and dry on public property in most circumstances.

House Bill 3115, which passed the state Senate last week and is en route to Gov. Kate Brown’s desk, is a response to a 2018 landmark homelessness case that impacted most western states with an intent to better support individuals experiencing homelessness.

While local governments should already be following rules set forth by the case known as Martin v. Boise, the bill, written at the behest of House Speaker Tina Kotek, forces cities to officially change any ordinance language still on the books to be in line with the court decision. It passed the Senate 28-10 on a largely party line vote, with state Sen. Betsy Johnson, of Scappoose, the lone Democrat to vote “no.”

In its ruling, the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said governments cannot criminalize conduct that is unavoidable as a result of experiencing homelessness. To punish a homeless individual for sleeping outside when there aren’t enough shelter beds would be comparable to punishing that individual for the fact that they are homeless, a consequence the court described as a cruel and unusual.

Alison McIntosh, policy director for the Oregon Housing Alliance, said in a letter supporting the bill that Martin on its own doesn’t provide clarity about what public property people are allowed to sleep on. Also, she said, cities have worked around Martin by enforcing “no camping” rules on some public property while not enforcing it on other public land.

“This does not solve the problem, though, for either people experiencing homelessness or



R.J. Marx/The Astorian

A person sleeps in the Seaside Civic and Convention Center parking lot in November.

law enforcement,” she wrote. “It does not provide people experiencing homelessness clear guidance about where they can or cannot sit or sleep.”

McIntosh said the bill is a step in the right direction.

While the Martin case could be overturned in the future, the new law would still protect unsheltered individuals sleeping on public land.

The bill also goes a step further than the court case with the addition of the demand to allow people to engage in activities necessary to “keep warm and dry.” This could include things like pitching a tent on public property to stay protected from severe weather.

Cities have until July 1, 2023, to update their ordinance language.

Under these new rules, cities can still decide what is considered reasonable enforcement. This means a city could prevent someone from sleeping on one piece of land if it clearly makes other public land available for individuals experiencing homelessness to sleep on. If a city wants to completely prohibit people from sleeping on public land, the city must first provide enough housing or emergency shelter beds for every person who is experiencing homelessness within that jurisdiction.

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