

Environmental Groups Sue to Halt Chevron's Plan to Upgrade Refinery

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Environmental groups filed suit Thursday to derail Chevron's plan to upgrade and expand its Richmond refinery to process lower-grade crude oil.

Communities for a Better Environment and three other groups, in a lawsuit filed in Contra Costa County Superior Court, asked a judge to overturn the city of Richmond's environmental impact report on the refinery project, saying it inadequately considered the likely increases in pollution.

"The whole EIR is fundamentally flawed," said Greg Karras, senior scientist at Communities for a Better Environment in Oakland. "We're saying, 'If you want to move forward with this project, you've got to analyze it properly.' "

The Richmond City Council narrowly approved Chevron's plans on July 17 after weeks of protests and testimony from community groups and labor unions. The plan allows Chevron to install new equipment to process 1,000 more barrels of gasoline a day, using crude oil that has 3 percent more sulfur than the oil it currently handles.

Environmental groups say the change will increase toxic emissions by 5 to 50 times higher than current levels, posing serious health risks to workers and neighbors. Refinery officials say the new equipment is cleaner and more modern than existing refinery facilities, and will decrease overall emissions at the century-old refinery.

Chevron's Richmond refinery, the largest in the region, provides about 25 percent of all the gasoline in Northern California and nearly all the jet fuel to the Bay Area's three airports.

Company spokesman Dean O'Hair said environmental review was more than adequate.

"It's tough to imagine that after a 3 1/2-year environmental review and permitting process that anyone would not consider the environmental review rather thorough," he said. "It's difficult to see, at this point, how they would question the merits."

Richmond Mayor Gayle McLaughlin, who voted against the project, said she wasn't surprised by the lawsuit.

"The plaintiffs submitted well-researched and well-annotated arguments against this project," she said. "I agree the EIR had many shortcomings."

Richmond City Councilman Tony Thurmond, who voted against the project but for the environmental impact report, said he thought the report adequately "addressed the various risks."

Thurmond voted against Chevron's use permit because he wanted a cap on the amount of low-grade crude oil Chevron could process.

Richmond City Manager Bill Lindsay had no comment on the lawsuit because he had not yet reviewed it.

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<http://www.sfgate.com/c/a/2008/09/04/BAUC12OC8K.DTL>

