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Phillips 66 plans to build San Luis Obispo County rail terminal

The terminal would send trains with up to 80 tank cars of crude oil through Southern California and the Bay Area to Phillips' Santa Maria Refinery.

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By Ralph Vartabedian
November 26, 2013 | 7:59 p.m.

Phillips 66, which operates refineries across California, is moving forward with a plan to build a rail terminal in San Luis Obispo County that would send trains with up to 80 tank cars of crude oil through Southern California and the Bay Area.

In a draft environmental impact statement filed this week, Phillips said it wants to build five sets of parallel tracks that would accommodate trains as often as 250 times per year at its Santa Maria Refinery.

The project is the latest effort by the refinery industry to increase crude imports to California from oil fields in North Dakota, Colorado and Texas. There are no pipelines that can transport large amounts of oil to the West Coast.



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Earlier, Valero Energy Corp. disclosed a plan to build a rail facility at its refinery in the Bay Area, and industry analysts expect that an oil rail facility will be built somewhere in the Central Valley.

While the amount of crude moving by rail throughout North America has been on a sharp rise over the last five years, the trend had not attracted a great of public attention until this summer, when a runaway train with 70 tank cars full of crude derailed in the Canadian town of Lac-Megantic, Quebec, killing 42 residents and destroying much of the downtown.

Since then, two other derailments of crude trains have occurred, and the Federal Railroad Administration issued an emergency order to improve safety. The Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration, an agency of the U.S. Transportation Department, has taken initial steps to strengthen tank car safety.

More than 200,000 barrels a month of crude have been imported into California by rail as recently as this summer, a fourfold increase from the prior year.

Until now, California has gotten most of its crude from Alaska or foreign nations via tanker ships, or from the state's own oil patches via a network of pipelines.

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Dean Acosta, a Phillips 66 spokesman, said the project will "enable rail delivery of crude oil from other North American sources because the refinery's traditional supply of crude oil from California fields is declining."

The new Phillips terminal, located 21/4 miles from the Pacific Ocean near the town of Nipomo, would be connected to Union Pacific's coastal line that runs from downtown Los Angeles north to the Bay Area.

A Union Pacific spokesman said its transportation of crude would meet federal laws and industry standards.

The environmental impact statement indicates that the mostly likely source of crude for the rail terminal would be North Dakota's Bakken Field, suggesting that more trains would run southbound from the Bay Area than northbound from Los Angeles.

Phillips is also seeking approval to increase the output of the Santa Maria Refinery by 10%, which is under review by the California Coastal Commission. The plant sends partially refined oil to one of Phillips' main refineries in the Bay Area by a 200-mile pipeline.

The impact statement acknowledges some safety and environmental issues with the new rail facility.

"The main hazards associated with the Rail Spur Project are potential accidents at the [Santa Maria Refinery] and along the [Union Pacific] mainline that could result in oil spills, fires and explosions," the report said.

But it added that an analysis of the risks of a fire or explosion along the railroad's main line found the risk to be "less than significant."

"Our new crude-by-rail fleet is constructed to meet or exceed the latest Assn. of American Railroads safety standards," Phillips spokesman Acosta said.

The report also found the crude trains would increase air pollutants such as nitrogen oxides. "Operational pollutant emissions within San Luis Obispo County could be potentially significant and unavoidable," it said.

Murray Wilson, a San Luis Obispo planning department official, said the project has received both local support and opposition. The extent of public opinion should become clearer during the 60-day public comment period that opened this week.

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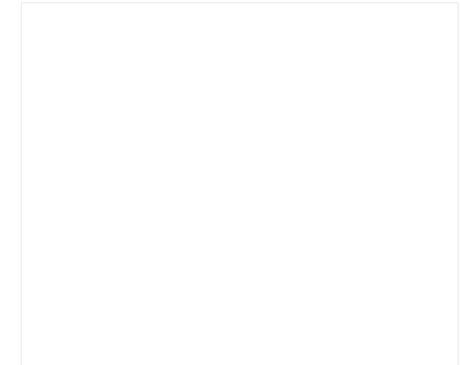


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