

Just like sacrificial lambs

While we were sleeping, not one, but two companies have decided that the Ventura County coast would make an excellent spot to offload imported liquefied natural gas to meet the state's energy needs. The announcement of the second LNG plant for the Ventura County coast should serve as a serious wake-up call to the residents of Oxnard.



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The proposals come within weeks of the announcement by Federal Reserve chief Alan Greenspan that a shortage of natural gas threatens the nation's economy.

In the first project, Crystal Energy LLC, a Houston company, claims it can deliver up to 25 percent of California's natural gas needs by establishing an LNG terminal on an abandoned oil-drilling platform 10.5 miles off the coast. Tankers would offload at the platform, where the LNG would return to a gaseous state before being pumped through a pipeline coming ashore near the Mandalay power station.

Crystal Energy claims there is no risk, but others disagree. An accident under certain conditions could allow a cloud of only partially gasified natural gas to drift ashore, where a single spark could ignite a devastating fireball.

The second LNG plant has been proposed by BHP Billiton, an Australian company. It also proposes offloading LNG at a platform built for that purpose. Again, it will be converted to gas before being pumped ashore. It is harder to argue against this project because, at 20 miles offshore, it's almost twice as far away from the coast.

The company proposes to bring the pipeline ashore at Ormond Beach, where there is high-density housing in nearby Port Hueneme on one side and military installations on the other. With 10 protected species, Ormond Beach is gradually being recognized as a biological treasure. What a shame it would be to see wildlife in the area damaged by an accident. Increases in vessel traffic in the channel will also negatively impact the Channel Islands Marine Sanctuary.

And what about terrorism? A 950-foot-long LNG tanker makes a large target. Even if any chance of terrorism is thwarted, human error — the root cause of accidents at Three-Mile Island, Chernobyl, Bhopal and the Exxon Valdez — is always a factor. What relevance did the safety records of the companies involved have at the time of those accidents?

Car-carrying ships and banana boats are in and out of Port Hueneme daily, and both commercial and sportfishing boats ply the nearby waters. As traffic increases, so does the possibility of an accident.

Assuming minimal effect from an earthquake would be a matter of luck, not strategy. Emergency response during an earthquake could be delayed.

When it comes out of the ground, natural gas has no odor. When the LNG is offloaded at either of these two projects, the characteristic scent that warns us of a gas leak would not be added until the gas enters the gas company grid near Camarillo. Whatever its cause — be it human error, earthquakes or sabotage — the gas leak, because it's odorless, might not be detected until it causes suffocation or accumulates within a structure and turns explosive.

We must mobilize to oppose these facilities. The potential for damage to our community and environment is large, and the money offered to Oxnard and Ventura County will not offset safety costs. Any citizen capable of calling or writing to elected officials must be willing to do so repeatedly to defeat these projects. Otherwise, adjust to the fact that, in case of accident, we've been selected as a sacrificial lamb for the sake of the economy and the financial benefit of a couple of companies located far away.

— Janet Bridgers is the founder and director of Earth Alert, a nonprofit Oxnard environmental organization.