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Contacts:

Marla Wilson, Resource Media, marla@resource-media.org, 415-971-9038

Julia May, Communities for a Better Environment, julia@cbecal.org, 510-658-2591

Air District Approves Tesoro Plan for West Coast's Largest Oil Refinery Despite Looming Pollution Threat to Neighbors

Project brings explosive crude, tar sands, cancer-causing benzene to majority low-income community

WILMINGTON, CA—On Friday night, the South Coast Air Quality Management District (AQMD) announced their approval of a massive Tesoro oil refinery merger and expansion project, known as the Tesoro Los Angeles Refinery Integration and Compliance (LARIC) project. The approval—which represents a stark departure from California's world-renowned leadership on climate change and clean energy—comes despite weak environmental review and impacts that span not just the Los Angeles area but the Pacific Coast. SB 32, passed by state lawmakers in 2016, calls for California to slash greenhouse gas emissions 40 percent by 2030. Advocates say California can't meet the boldest climate change goal in North America while simultaneously expanding the state's oil refineries.

The area surrounding the project—nestled between Wilmington, Long Beach, and Carson—is 90 percent people of color and is already overburdened with five refineries, nearby highways like the 710 and 110, the ports of Los Angeles and Long Beach, and several other major pollution sources. Over the past three years, local residents have raised concerns about the impacts of current pollution and their apprehension about bringing additional pollution to the community. Despite participating through AQMD's public engagement process, their concerns were overlooked.

“After thousands marched to the gates of Tesoro on April 29 to protest this expansion and the pollution that Wilmington, Carson, and West Long Beach neighbors have to face daily, we are dismayed AQMD did not even honor our request to hold one more public hearing before certifying the project,” said Alicia Rivera, a Wilmington community organizer with Communities for a Better Environment (CBE).

In advancing the project, AQMD dismissed evidence that the project will allow Tesoro to bring to Los Angeles, for the first time, large quantities of North Dakota crude oil which can have high levels of cancer-causing benzene and Canadian tar sands. Tesoro is also linking its pipelines to the controversial Dakota Access Pipeline, which may also contribute to the new Los Angeles supplies. This shift to more extreme, more explosive crude lies at the heart of the controversy over the project. The Air District continues to ignore the project features a switch to this crude, and this significant change wasn't studied in the environmental impact report that regulators approved Friday. However, Tesoro has publicly confirmed the crude switch with investors.

In a report released in full in April, researchers revealed that [pollution at the existing Tesoro refinery is drastically higher](#) than the community has been led to believe. The FluxSense report, conducted in partnership with AQMD, revealed volatile organic compound (VOC) emissions at the existing Tesoro facility are 6 times higher than reported. In approving the project, AQMD [conceded the project will further increase VOCs](#). Advocates say the FluxSense report should have required the Air District to reconsider the Tesoro project's environmental analysis and even reevaluate polluters' compliance on other smog plans. They say AQMD's failure to protect local residents could stem from a shakeup last year in which industry-friendly Republicans took over the Air District, fired its long-time director, and rolled back pollution protections.

“The recent joint study by the Air District found that Tesoro’s benzene emissions are astonishingly 43 times worse than reported, which means the methods used to calculate the impacts of Tesoro’s expansion are also grossly underestimated, and current pollution is far worse than we knew,” said Julia May, senior scientist with CBE. “Approving this project now, without addressing data revealed by the Air District’s own research, is just another shameful form of science denial.”

The Tesoro project will link up with a larger West Coast pathway of extreme crude oil that threatens local communities, scenic wildlife areas, and waterways. It will bring explosive fuels by rail from North Dakota to the controversial Tesoro Savage terminal proposed for Vancouver, WA, and then to Los Angeles via ship, where Tesoro plans new storage tanks to house 3.4 million barrels of additional crude oil, nearly doubling current capacity.

As a result of its broader impacts, the project has elicited concerns from leaders up and down the West Coast. In California, these leaders have included U.S. Congresswoman Nanette Diaz Barragán (D-44); Mayor Eric Garcetti of Los Angeles; Mayor Albert Robles of Carson; and Mayor Robert Garcia of Long Beach. Pacific Northwest leaders who have raised concerns about upstream impacts include Executive Dow Constantine of King County, WA; Mayor Arlene Burns of Mosier, OR; Councilmember Bart Hansen of Vancouver, WA; and Mayor Paul Blackburn of Hood River, OR. Last year, Gov. Kate Brown of Oregon and Gov. Jay Inslee of Washington urged an [indefinite moratorium](#) on oil train traffic in their states, and Washington Attorney General Bob Ferguson [shared similar concerns](#). Extreme crude oil conveyed on these Northwest railways would ultimately end up at the expanded Tesoro facility in Los Angeles.

CBE had previously called on AQMD to recirculate the environmental impact report as a draft. Given numerous inaccuracies with the project’s final environmental impact report, CBE’s legal team is currently evaluating their options for appealing AQMD’s approval of the environmental impact report.

“There is ample evidence that the refinery integration project will enable Tesoro to process unprecedented, significant quantities of fracked Bakken crude and also Canadian tar sands crude,” said Gladys Limón, staff attorney with CBE. “Tesoro’s environmental impact report fails to analyze this change in crude feedstock, leaving the public in the dark about the project’s true health and safety impacts.”

Advocates are worried about what AQMD’s approval means for local residents who already bear the brunt of some of California’s worst air quality.

“Our youth are especially at risk from the heavy air pollution from Tesoro and the other refineries, and face a future of catastrophic climate change,” said Ashley Hernandez, Wilmington youth organizer with CBE. “The Air District has to stop approving unlimited, dangerous fossil fuel expansion and start taking seriously the need to transition to clean renewable transportation—we already have the technologies.”

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Founded in 1978, [Communities for a Better Environment](#) (CBE) is one of the preeminent environmental justice organizations in the nation. The mission of CBE is to build people’s power in California’s communities of color and low-income communities to achieve environmental health and justice by preventing and reducing pollution and building green, healthy and sustainable communities and environments. CBE provides residents in blighted and heavily polluted urban communities in California with organizing skills, leadership training and legal, scientific and technical assistance so that they can successfully confront threats to their health and wellbeing.