

40 Years Later | The Daily Nexus



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Jeff Imamura / Daily Nexus

Forty years after workers on Union Oil's Platform A caused a crack to open in the floor of the Santa Barbara Channel – a rift that released an estimated 3 million gallons of crude oil into the Pacific and eventually onto Santa Barbara's famed beaches – environmentalists are asking state officials to approve the first new off-shore oil lease in California since that fateful day.

January 28, 1969 is the environmentalist's call to action – infamous not only because of the damage the oil spill caused, but also because of the feelings stirred in the millions of Americans who watched the events unfold on television.

It took a full 10 days to stop the oil from seeping out of the cracks beneath Platform A, and in that week and a half the national environmental movement took its first steps.

“[The '69 oil spill] resulted in the passage of almost all the environment laws we have today,” Linda Krop, lead counsel for the Environmental Defense Center and lecturer for the Environmental Studies Program at UCSB, said. “All of that came after and because of the oil spill.”

Yet despite the movement's origins, environmentalists will stand behind Plains Exploration and Production Co. – known as PXP – tomorrow when the Texas-based oil company asks the California State Lands Commission to approve a proposal – dubbed the Tranquillon Ridge Project – to drill into state waters. If approved, it would be the first oil lease allowed by California since the 1969 oil spill.

Even more significant, however, is that the proposal – which was written in coordination with several local environmental groups – provides that, in exchange for access to the new oil field, PXP would shut down all its operations in Santa Barbara County by 2022. If approved, it would be the first agreement of its kind in the county's history.

“For the first time ever [the proposal] would result in the removal of four platforms,” David Landecker, Executive Director of the EDC, said. “In exchange for allowing PXP to drill into Tranquillon oil field, they will remove Platform Irene in 16 years, and the other three platforms in nine years. Those platforms have been there for 25 to 30 years and without this proposal they will be there for another 25 to 30 years.”

That an oil company has the backing of so many prominent environmental groups, including the Sierra Club and Surfrider Foundation, is a cause for surprise in a community known for its staunch opposition to off-shore oil drilling.

John Garamendi, Lt. Governor of California and member of the California State Lands Commission, said that the lessons of 1969 are still pertinent today.

“The 1969 oil spill is extremely important today,” Garamendi said in an interview yesterday. “It alerted Californians to the dangers of off-shore oil drilling and the impacts it can have on tourism and the environment. It remains a flag, a warning to all of us – there are risks associated with drilling in the ocean and those risks can be devastating.”

The devastating nature of the 1969 spill may have stopped the state from issuing any new off-shore oil leases, but it didn't have any affect on leases already in place nor did it stop the federal government from allowing their own leases beyond the three-mile state water line. Stricter regulations were put in place, but additional spills, while not in Santa Barbara, have continued nonetheless.

“The facts indicate that we are continuing to learn to protect the environment, especially in regards to oil,” Garamendi said, referring to the Exxon Valdez and San Francisco Bay spills. “Each incident, wherever it may occur, leads to a response and often that response is tighter regulations.”

The proposal before Garamendi and State Lands Commission tomorrow, Krop argued, would suggest a different approach to dealing with the potential problems associated with oil production.

“This could be part of [a] turning point,” she said. “We should not only stop any new development but start removing the existing platforms.”

The proposal also includes guarantees from PXP that it would obtain carbon neutrally for direct project emissions and

would donate approximately 4,000 acres of land to the public for conservation.

Garamendi, who along with the State Controller and State Director of Finance makes up the SLC, has publicly opposed the proposal, however, and said the timing worries him, as does the ambiguity concerning the revenues from said project.

“I’ve made it clear over the last four weeks publicly that I am opposed [to this proposal] for two reasons,” he said. “One is the timing of this proposed lease could negatively affect the effort to restore the [federal] moratorium on off-shore oil drilling on the California coast. And I am a no vote unless or until the state revenues from this lease are used to reduce gas emissions by supporting renewal technologies and the implementation of those technologies.”

The EDC’s Landecker, however, dismissed those concerns.

“With all due respect to the Lt. Governor, and I have great deal of respect for him, I wish I could give more credence to either of those reasons,” Landecker said. “As for wanting more funding for alternative energy, it’s not up to us how the state revenue is allocated, that’s up to the legislature... The Lt. Governor could suggest such legislation, that but we cannot, the oil company cannot.”

Concerning the timing, Landecker and Krop both pointed out that the proposal would shorten the life of the platforms, and that if denied, other companies could purchase the platforms and continue drilling into the nearby oil fields not located in state waters.

Regardless of what happens, Landecker said, the EDC will continue to fight for the environment – even if it means teaming up with those responsible for the movement’s creation.

“[The '69 spill] was just the beginning, but what it did was mobilize citizens to make environmental protection a major issue,” Landecker said. “Making money is important, but having an Earth we can live on is even more important.”