

Project opponents question status of waste-to-energy plant

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A proposed waste-to-energy plant near Gonzales is close to being on the ropes, opponents of the project claimed Thursday.

The claim was rejected by the general manager of the Salinas Valley Solid Waste Authority, who said work has slowed because of new tests by the proponent and efforts to get a critical decision in Sacramento corrected through legislation.

"A lot of (environmental impact report) work has slowed down or stopped, but there is ongoing work," said Patrick Mathews, general manager of the solid-waste agency.

Opponents released hundreds of emails and letters obtained from the solid-waste agency. They contend the documents show the agency working hand-in-hand with the project developer.

Some of the documents show the project's EIR has been put on hold for a year — to complete a biological survey — and could face a longer delay because of a state decision changing the project's renewable-energy status.

Mathews said the developer, Plasco, is trying to get that issue — which he acknowledged is critical to the project — resolved by working with the governor's office and Legislature.

Opponents say that is another area where the agency and developer are working too cozily.

"Clearly the solid-waste authority is very desperate," said Bradley Angel of Greenaction for Health and Environmental Justice. "They are colluding on special-interest legislation, spying on residents, and no one knew the EIR was on hold for months."

Greenaction, an environmental group with offices in San Francisco, Utah and Arizona, is working with Gonzales-area residents who oppose the Plasco plant.

The documents released Thursday are bound to increase unease about the proposal, Angel said.

"I think residents will be showing up at the next waste authority meeting (in August) demanding that this project be canceled," he said.

Greenaction released copies of communications from January to June between the solid-waste agency and Plasco Energy Group and the governor's office.

Plasco, an Ottawa company, is seeking permission to build a plant at the Johnson Canyon Landfill that would turn garbage to a fuel gas. Opponents contend the plant's plasma-arc technology would emit toxic emissions and is based on unproven technology.

Greenaction says the cache of emails and letters show work on the EIR has been delayed for a year, and the unfavorable ruling from a state recycling agency on Plasco's project could result in an 18-month delay.

"That means they are completely skunked for 18 months or longer," Angel said.

The documents show the solid-waste agency and Plasco worked together in an effort to get special legislation to help the project, the group said.

Mathews said his agency was asked to review the legislation by Plasco, but the company has been taking the lead in Sacramento.

Among the documents released was an email from a Plasco official about a June 1 letter from the governor's office, which appeared amenable to the company's effort to get around the unfavorable ruling on its renewable-energy designation.

"I'm not sure on whether public knowledge of this is good or bad," the company official told Mathews in the email.

Mathews said Greenaction's conclusions were the stuff of "a deep conspiracy theory."

"The issue of collusion is fluff," he said. "They are trying to find something to make the project look bad."

The solid-waste agency includes Monterey County and five Salinas Valley cities.

The current board chairman, county Supervisor Fernando Armenta, said: "I don't oppose or favor Plasco. I'm waiting to see how the EIR turns out and the financial analysis."

Mathews said the group twisted an email in which agency and Plasco representatives discussed how to hold "a reasonable discussion" with plant opponents into an allegation the agency was compiling and sharing information about opponents.

"We don't have secret files and all sorts of fantasy things Mr. Angel likes to put out to the media," he said.

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