

Looking Forward

Stopping the spur - derailing the oil company train



By Mark James Miller June 22, 2018

When Phillips Petroleum announced in December 2013 that it intended to change its method of delivering crude oil to its Nipomo Mesa refinery from underground pipes to railroad tanker cars, it had no idea what kind of determined opposition it would stir up.

Phillips' plan would mean mile-long trains carrying 2.2 million gallons of crude oil chugging down the California coast on aging railroad tracks, bringing with them the possibility of an environmental disaster. In addition, a 1.3-mile railroad spur would have to be built off Union Pacific's main line to the refinery.

The latter prompted Nipomo Mesa residents Linda Reynolds and Sam Saltoun to found the Mesa Refinery Watch Group, (MRWG), to oppose the spur and Phillips' new method of bringing oil to the refinery. The trains would be going past their homes, which would mean noise, air pollution, and the very real chance of derailment and an environmental catastrophe of unimaginable proportions.

What makes transporting crude oil by rail so dangerous? Track failure, leading to derailment. When railroad cars carrying highly flammable crude oil derail, horrific fires and explosions follow.

To cite just one example: In July 2013, in Lac-Megantic, Quebec, a train pulling 72 cars containing 2.1 million gallons of crude oil jumped the track. The ensuing fire and explosion took the lives of 47 people and destroyed 30 buildings. MRWG did not want that to happen in Nipomo — or anywhere else on the California coast.

To prevent Phillips from putting its plan into operation, MRGW worked from the ground up. "We were as grassroots as we could be," said Linda Reynolds. "We knocked on doors, we made presentations as far away as Berkeley and Los Angeles, we put

together a newsletter and a website. We always stayed on message and we made sure that everything we said was factual.”

Reynolds pointed out that for 60-plus years Phillips has delivered crude oil to the Mesa refinery by the safer method of underground pipes. Its explanation for the proposed change — that it was necessary for the refinery to remain “viable,” didn’t stand up to scrutiny. Its 2012 company report made it clear this move was about profits, not local jobs.

MRWG’s mission — to educate citizens on the dangers of Phillips’ proposal, to inform public officials and political groups of the facts, and to coordinate with other groups in order to oppose the changes Phillips intended to make, began to pay off. City after city, and county after county, upon learning of the potential consequences of transporting crude oil overland, began to formally oppose the project.

Knowledge is power, and the more the people of MRGW learned about crude oil the more they realized how important it was to stop Phillips from transporting it by rail. When asked if it planned to transport the highly flammable Bakken crude to Nipomo, at first the company representatives hedged, saying they were unsure. Later they pledged not to transport Bakken crude, but would instead transport the allegedly safer “Tar Sands” crude from Canada. However, research quickly proved that Tar Sands crude is diluted with benzene, making it just as dangerous as Bakken.

MRGW’s campaign paid off. By 2017, 28 cities and eight counties were officially opposed to the Phillips’ project. In October 2017, it was reported that the project had officially been shelved. “We are cautiously optimistic,” says Laurence Shinderman, another dedicated member of MRGW. Co-founder Sam Saltoun agrees. “We’re staying vigilant. We’re not against oil, and we’re not against Phillips. But we were against a dumb idea.” For the present, the dumb idea is dead.

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