

## Valdez and environmental law group both ask more time to response to draft EIS

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The city of Valdez, which wants to see the Alaska LNG terminal built in its community rather than Nikiski, and an environmental legal organization have filed separate requests with federal regulators asking additional time to comment on the draft environmental impact statement for the project.

Unless the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission changes the deadline, public comments on the draft EIS are due Oct. 3. The 3,800-page environmental review was issued June 28, and FERC held public meetings Sept. 9-12 in eight communities across Alaska to accept comments on the draft.

Valdez and Trustees for Alaska, an Anchorage-based environmental law group reviewing the EIS for several clients, asked in separate filings that FERC extend the comment deadline 30 days past the closing date or 30 days after the state project team submits the last of detailed information requested by FERC, whichever is later.

“Given the complexity of the issues involved in this massive project, the impacts that could occur to many public resources, and the key information that is still not available to the public, I am requesting that FERC extend the comment period for an additional 30 days after the applicant has provided the needed information,” Valerie Brown, legal director at Trustees for Alaska, said in an Aug. 29 filing with the commission.

“The city (of Valdez) joins the Trustees for Alaska in their request for an extension of time,” the law firm of Brena, Bell & Walker, which represents the city, said in a Sept. 16 filing with FERC.

“In order for the city and the public to provide meaningful comments on the DEIS (draft EIS), additional time is required for sufficient review of both recently filed information and additional information expected to be made available in the near future,” the Valdez letter said.

Trustees for Alaska, which did not identify its clients in its Aug. 29 letter to FERC, listed more than a dozen updates, reports, data sets, calculations, and other items that the state project team had not submitted to FERC as of Aug. 28.

The Alaska Gasline Development Corp. (AGDC), the 9-year-old state agency given the job of finishing the EIS even though there are no customers or investors for the \$43 billion project, submitted hundreds of pages of additional information to FERC on Sept. 18. The filing covered many of the topics raised in the Trustees for Alaska letter, including an updated construction blasting plan, calculations of air emissions during construction, and temporary and permanent impacts to polar bear habitat.

In requesting more time for public comments, the Trustees also noted that FERC on July 11 asked the National Marine Fisheries Service and U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to consult on possible damage to essential habitat for several endangered or threatened species, including Cook Inlet beluga whales and polar bears. “Ideally,” the Trustees said, the agencies’ opinions

and assessments “would be available before public comments on the potential impacts of the project are due to FERC.”

Under the commission’s current schedule, it would issue the final EIS in March 2020 for the state-led project to move Alaska North Slope natural gas through an 807-mile pipeline to Nikiski on the east side of Cook Inlet, where the gas would be liquefied and loaded aboard ships for delivery to buyers in Asia.

Valdez has promoted its community as a better location for the gas liquefaction plant and marine terminal, and the city’s Sept. 16 filing with FERC is one of several statements it has made on the project over the past couple of years.

“It is apparent that the draft EIS fails to rigorously explore and objectively evaluate” the pipeline route and LNG terminal Valdez, the city said in a statement issued July 8. The draft “ignores the substantial advantages associated with the Valdez alternative,” the city said.

The draft EIS review found insufficient reason to endorse either Valdez or the Matanuska-Susitna Borough’s Port MacKenzie over Nikiski, citing a range of factors that supported the project’s preferred site.

“FERC did what they’re supposed to do, and I thought they did a fine job,” Matanuska-Susitna Borough Manager John Moosey told the Alaska Journal of Commerce in July. He said the borough accepted the outcome.

The two requests to extend the public comment period were the only such filings in the FERC docket as of Sept. 23. General comments in support or opposition to the natural gas project were minimal.

Several residents of Eugene, Oregon, filed statements in opposition to the Alaska LNG project, arguing that methane emissions would add to greenhouse gas-induced climate change. “Please oppose this dangerous project,” one of the letters said.

One letter came from Nikiski supporting a variation of the route for the final miles of the pipeline passing through their community to the LNG plant.

A few letters had come in as of Sept. 23 from Anchorage and Fairbanks residents in support of the project, economic development, and improved air quality in Fairbanks from burning gas instead of dirtier fuels. “The Alaska LNG Project will also be a new source of revenue to the state of Alaska, thus helping to provide long-term support for services to Alaskans, including our most disadvantaged,” said a letter from an Anchorage resident.

John Shively, state Natural Resources commissioner 1995-2000, also cited the economic benefits to the state and the advantages of gas as a cleaner energy for Alaskans in his letter supporting the project.

The draft EIS, Shively said in his Sept. 18 letter, “concludes most project impacts would not be significant and would be reduced to minor impacts with the implementation of proposed avoidance, minimization and mitigation measures.”

He also commented that “establishment of local subsistence implementation councils to identify community issues and concerns will help to ensure impacts to subsistence activities are minimal.”

The draft EIS determined the North Slope-to-Cook Inlet project would damage some permafrost, wetlands, and forest, but many of the effects could be reduced or eliminated if the right steps are taken during construction and operation to avoid, minimize, or repair the damage.

“With the implementation of various best management practices and our recommendations, most impacts on wildlife would be less than significant, but adverse impacts on some species, including caribou (Central Arctic herds) and federally listed threatened and endangered species, would occur,” the report said.

Not unexpected for a project of this size, the draft listed pluses and minuses in the same sentence: “The project would result in positive impacts on the state and local economies, but adverse impacts on housing, population, and public services could occur in some areas.”

In addition to the dwindling list of reports, engineering plans, and other items the state project team still owed to federal regulators as of mid-September, FERC on Sept. 17 sent the state corporation a 35-page request for more information on the project’s hazard mitigation design, such as ventilation, spill containment, hazard detection, emergency response, and shutdown at the gas treatment plant at Prudhoe Bay and gas liquefaction plant at Nikiski.

The requests were based on reviews by FERC staff and a third-party contractor hired to specifically look at such issues. The request for additional details was expected and is common for all federally approved LNG projects.

The state gasline corporation’s responses to the engineering and design questions are not due until after the close of public comment on the draft EIS but can be submitted early.