

FERC puts LNG terminal along Columbia River on next week's agenda

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A rendering of the proposed Bradwood Landing LNG site on the Columbia River.

Federal energy regulators will consider and may vote next Thursday on whether to approve the proposed Bradwood Landing liquefied natural gas terminal, about 20 miles east of Astoria on the Columbia River.

The potential vote by the five-member [Federal Energy Regulatory Commission](#) in Washington, D.C., is coming earlier than state leaders, opponents of the project and even Bradwood's backers expected. The commission just issued its 700-page [final environmental impact statement](#) on the project last month. Under the agency's administrative rules, next Thursday's meeting is the first in which the commission is allowed to vote on the project.

FERC has never specified when the vote would take place, but most participants expected a decision later in the year. The agency was still collecting major data submissions from Bradwood as recently as early this week.

Opponents said the possibility of a vote next week -- mentioned in an agenda issued this week -- was another sign of a federal regulatory railroad job chugging along ahead of the Bush administration's departure.

The proposed terminal would offload supercooled natural gas delivered from abroad in tankers, reheat the liquid to its vapor state, then pump it to market in the Willamette Valley, Washington or California over one of two proposed pipelines.

Backers of three proposals to build LNG terminals in Oregon, including [Northwest Natural Gas](#) Co. and other regional utilities that would likely buy the gas, contend that imported LNG would keep gas prices low, even as domestic supplies tighten and competition for Canadian and Rockies gas increases.

Opponents believe the state can buy gas more cheaply and with less pollution and environmental damage by increasing pipeline capacity from Wyoming.

The state of Oregon has consistently criticized the federal agency for what it contends is a rushed, laissez-faire approach to Bradwood's licensing driven more by ideology and politics than regulations. The state had asked FERC to redo its environmental analysis of Bradwood to account for newly available information. FERC rejected the request.

"This is more of the same," Anna Richter Taylor, a spokeswoman for [Gov. Ted Kulongoski](#), said Thursday. "FERC continues to move forward without regard for Oregon's concerns."

While there is no formal public comment period on FERC's final environmental analysis, Kulongoski and the state's natural resource agencies are expected to deliver comments to FERC today.

The state's congressional delegation also has weighed in with criticisms, saying FERC has proceeded unilaterally, ignored the latest research and failed to adequately address community concerns.

"FERC is looking more like a kangaroo court every day," said Brent Foster, executive director of the environmental group [Columbia Riverkeeper](#). "They want to get this approved before the Bush administration leaves office, but they're just bumbling their way through it and making it much easier to legally challenge."

Even the backer of the project, Houston-based [NorthernStar Natural Gas Inc.](#) said it was surprised to see the project on FERC's agenda so soon. On Monday, the company delivered a voluminous response to agency data requests on how it would offset damage to the environment and endangered species such as salmon.

Joe Desmond, a spokesman for NorthernStar, said FERC may do one of three things next week: address a procedural issue, ask staff questions or vote on the project.

The agenda for next week's meeting is ambiguous. It says the two-hour meeting would include the FERC staff's summary of the administrative record on the project. Then, the agenda says, the FERC commissioners, all presidentially appointed, would discuss the case with staff and pose questions.

"Afterward," the announcement says, "Chairman Kelliher may call for a vote. After the meeting, the formal order will be posted on the FERC Web site at a later date."

If the agency votes to approve the project, Desmond said, it would be conditioned on NorthernStar satisfying the concerns of other federal and state agencies. NorthernStar still needs to meet conditions of various clean air, clean water and coastal zone management rules.

"We can't break ground on the project until we satisfy all the conditions," Desmond said. "It will take time to do that."

Columbia Riverkeeper's Foster said FERC's approval looks inevitable, whether it comes next week or next month. What's missing, he said, is the state's definitive position on the terminal.

"It just underlines why the state needs to use its discretion to block this project," he said.