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EDITOR'S PICK

Stepankowsky column: Riverkeeper is once again, off the mark

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ANDRE STEPANKOWSKY

Columbia Riverkeeper is at it again — trying to thwart this region's latest attempt to address decades-long economic stagnation.

The Hood River-based environmental group, which was instrumental in killing the proposed Port of Kalama methanol project, opposes the \$1.5 billion biofuels refinery proposed at

Port Westward, north of Clatskanie in Columbia County.

Riverkeeper's argument, strangely enough, is that the biofuels plant is a good project in the wrong location.

Please ...

NEXT Renewable Fuels Oregon says the plant would create approximately 240 permanent jobs, employ 3,500 construction workers and eventually produce up to 2.1 million gallons of biofuels daily. The feedstock would arrive by ship, and finished fuels would depart by ship to destinations across the West Coast.

Creating renewable diesel, jet fuel and naphtha from used cooking oil, vegetable oils and animal fats is far cleaner than refining from crude oil. NEXT asserts its plant would reduce greenhouse gas emissions equal to removing 1 million cars from the road.

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Oregon's Department of Environmental Quality already has concluded the plant would not emit troubling or unhealthy amounts of air pollution.

About the only major apparent downside is that the project would disturb or fill about 117 acres of wetlands and waterways — a disturbance and loss that must be compensated for somehow.

There are many outstanding questions and claims that need to be addressed before this project gets a final go-ahead. What, for example, happens to the waste? Are spill prevention and response plans adequate to protect the Columbia River and other waterways near the plant site and along railroad tracks? Would the energy consumption of railroading raw materials to the plant, processing them and then transporting the finished product to market offset the benefits of the cleaner fuels? Is the project compatible with surrounding land uses, which is mainly farmland?

Some of these questions will be answered in the environmental impact study overseen by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers. Until it is completed, it's too soon to make a judgment about this project, as good as it apparently sounds for both jobs and the environment.

Riverkeeper leaders, though, already have made up their minds. Last week, they reiterated their opposition to the NEXT project, citing potential threat of spills to water resources, farming and soils. Dan Serres, the group's conservation director, said

in a press release that the group supports biodiesel as a way of weaning the nation away from fossil fuels.

“But this company, this plan, this place — it raises major red flags,” Cerres said last week. The site, he said, is “unsuitable for a refinery this size.”

This doublespeak exposes the group for what it really is — an opponent of any large industrial project on the lower Columbia, especially anything that smacks of petroleum or fuel production.

The project would be built on Port of Columbia County land that is already zoned for industrial uses. The Port Westward area has a history of industrial activity, including a large, gas-fired power station operated there by Portland General Electric. An ethanol plant was built and operated in that vicinity in recent years but failed due to construction and management problems. There are few homes nearby, and water and rail transportation are at hand.

So, if not here, where could the plant be built without objection?

We can't believe the mere presence of an industrial facility is incompatible with nearby agricultural use in this day of regulatory strictness. This does not appear to be a farms vs. factory conflict.

And regarding fuel transport on the Columbia River — millions of gallons of petroleum products already transit the great river annually. It's part of life here.

It's important to recognize that biofuels is not a new or experimental industry. The U.S. already is the world leading producer of biofuels, mostly by processing corn for ethanol as a gasoline additive.

Somewhere along the line, this region must accept fuel-related companies if it is to reverse decades of economic stagnation and decline. The Lower Columbia River region is not going to become a hub of high-tech enterprises that depend on an

intellectually sophisticated workforce. Its future is in manufacturing and transportation.

The region already has lost fossil fuel projects that would have brought hundreds of jobs and millions of dollars in tax revenue and which also would have helped battle climate change.

Riverkeeper has vowed to fight all fossil fuel projects (NEXT is not really a fossil fuel project, by the way, because its raw sources are modern and renewable). Riverkeeper led the charge against the Kalama methanol plant, using distortions to paint the project as a potential environmental disaster.

The region can't allow such distortions to drive the debate over the NEXT project. The capricious and prolonged permitting fight over the Kalama project already has made it difficult to recruit manufacturers.

Surely, the world needs to turn away from burning fuels to produce energy — as the latest United Nations climate report so alarmingly reminded us this week.

Still, every credible analysis shows fossil fuels and biofuels will need to be part of our future. The world can't convert to wind, solar, hydrogen, nuclear fusion and other energy sources all at once. It must be a transitional effort, which makes potential win-win projects like NEXT's necessary.

This column has been updated.

Andre Stepankowsky retired in August 2020 after a 41-year career as a reporter and city editor at The Daily News. He has won or shared in many prestigious journalism awards, including the staff's 1981 Pulitzer Prize for coverage of Mount St. Helens. His column will appear on the editorial page every other Wednesday.