

Second LNG port gets critical federal permit

By Douglas A. Moser , Staff writer
Gloucester Daily Times

The second liquefied natural gas terminal proposed off Gloucester received a nod from the U.S. Maritime Administration for a deep-water permit yesterday, a little more than a week after the other project received similar approval.

Local fishing industry advocates sighed with resignation, but some remained hopeful of a last-minute quashing of the projects that have already cleared major state and federal hurdles toward final approval.

Maritime Administrator Sean T. Connaughton decided to issue Excelerate Energy a permit to operate the deep-water port in federal waters 13 miles southeast of Gloucester. He issued a permit Jan. 31 to Suez North America for its port, proposed seven miles off Gloucester.

"We applaud the efforts of MARAD, the Coast Guard and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts in their evaluation and approval of the Northeast Gateway," said Excelerate Energy Executive Vice President Rob Bryngelson.

Many associated with the fishing industry, which opposes the terminals because of their location and a security perimeter that will prevent fishermen from harvesting the fruitful area near them, have become more fatalistic since the first state approvals came down in December.

"It doesn't surprise me because once (the government) issued the final impact statements, they made it clear they were going to get these permits," said Angela Sanfilippo, president of the Gloucester Fishermen's Wives Association. "The only person who could have stopped this is (former) Governor (Mitt Romney), and he didn't."

Vito Calomo, executive director of the Massachusetts Fishery Recovery Commission, said although he thinks the LNG ports are dangerous and will further damage the fishing industry, he remains hopeful they will not achieve final approval through a series of state and federal permits which are still pending.

"I still have faith things won't happen," he said. "They're getting permits and its going forward, but I believe something will happen in the 11th hour to stop this."

Excelerate plans to have its LNG port operating by the end of this year; Suez will begin construction in 2009 and hopes to have its terminal running by the end of that year.

Energy advocates believe the ports are necessary to bring natural gas to New England in time to head off a possible shortage of supply in the coming few years.

"The projects off Gloucester and others in the region are important to ensuring the region has a reliable and affordable supply of energy in both the near term and the long term," said Carl Gustin, a spokesman for the New England Energy Alliance.

Gustin said the alliance understands concerns many have about safety, particularly large tankers full of natural gas steaming close to shore, but pointed to the uneventful history of natural gas transport.

"There is a lot of history to draw on. It's important they go through review, but if they're able to satisfy the concerns raised to the regulatory agencies, then we think it should go forward," he said.

Besides the state permits both companies received in December, the LNG ports still require approval from the Army Corps of Engineers and need water and air discharge permits from the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

Excelerate has also applied for an EPA permit to discharge nearly 2 million gallons of treated seawater it will use to test the pipeline it will install in the seabed. The 30-day public review period began Jan. 25 for that permit.

The two ports, which are buoys large tankers will dock with to unload vaporized liquefied natural gas, are within five miles of each other in a section of ocean called Block 125 east of Marblehead that is popular because of the abundance of fish and the proximity to shore.

Each terminal and the tankers that will dock with them will have an 800-yard security perimeter where other boats cannot travel.

Because federal regulations limit the amount of time fishermen are allowed to spend at sea, local advocates of the fishing industry, as well as local elected officials, have said the security perimeters will force fishermen to travel farther and use more time at sea getting to their catch.

Environmentalists are concerned because of the possibility the increased ship traffic could kill endangered North Atlantic right whales.

Former Massachusetts Secretary of Environmental Affairs Robert Gollidge Jr. issued environmental certificates for the two LNG ports on Dec. 1 and 12, and he ordered a total of \$47 million in mitigation funding from the two companies for affected communities and industries. Of that, \$12.6 million will go to a nonprofit organization to be established in Gloucester to buy and lease fishing permits from fishermen who want to leave the industry.

Some of that mitigation package is earmarked for environmental studies and right whale detection for the tankers.

Romney gave his approval for both projects Dec. 19. Federal law gives the governor of the adjacent state the power to reject deep-water ports or to accept them with conditions.

Gov. Deval Patrick, sworn into office Jan. 4, two days after the last deadline for a Massachusetts governor to approve the LNG terminals, does not have the power to reverse Romney's decision, though he has not indicated whether he could use state permits still required to halt the proposals.

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