



PORT ARANSAS SOUTH JETTY

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Port seeks permit for discharge into channel

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A dolphin surfs ahead of a ship in the Corpus Christi Ship Channel in Port Aransas. On environmental grounds, a citizens' group said it will fight a Port of Corpus Christi Authority proposal to discharge desalination plant brine in the channel. Port officials have said it wouldn't cause environmental problems. Staff photo by Dan Parker

Harbor Island is involved in an effort by the Port of Corpus Christi Authority to help clear the way for possible construction of a seawater desalination facility and discharge of treated wastewater into the Corpus Christi Ship Channel, according to the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ).

The port is applying for a Texas Pollution Discharge Elimination System permit to discharge brine associated with a proposed desalination plant, said Rosie Collin, director of community relations with the port.

"In this case, this permit is for an outfall discharge," Collin said. "The location is generally the port-owned property on Harbor Island. The location of the proposed facility has not been fully identified except that the discharge point would be on Harbor Island."

The port has applied for a permit that would authorize flow of treated wastewater "at a volume not to exceed a daily average flow of 95,600,000 gallons per day," said a TCEQ notice of receipt of application and intent to obtain water quality permit.

The application is for a facility that would produce 50 million gallons per day at full build-out, according to Collin.

"How the plant is constructed and for what capacity initially has not been fully investigated," she said.



facility hasn't been engineered, he said.

The port commission in June approved a contract with Wood Environmental and Infrastructure Solutions "to complete the necessary permitting for desalination facilities at both La Quinta and Harbor Island," Collin said. That would include conceptual planning of an outfall structure and also water intake from the channel, Collin said.

The material labeled wastewater by the TCEQ would be "brine that results from the treatment of the water to remove the salt in order to create water that is drinkable or usable for potable purposes," Collin said. "This is done through filtering and reverse osmosis, which creates a brine waste."

Zahn, a Port Aransas resident, said he doesn't believe it would be harmful to the marine environment because tides would tend to disperse it quickly.

Along those same lines, Collin said that the discharge application to TCEQ included a section that summarized the modeling that was performed with TCEQ guidance to show the dissipation of the brine discharge back in the environment at Harbor Island would not impact the surrounding ecosystem and was protective of the ecosystem."

Port Aransas Conservancy, a citizens' group, "strongly opposes" the idea of a desalination plant's wastewater flowing into the channel, said John Donovan, a spokesman for the group.

"The tides would move this plume into the surrounding wetlands, killing off the spawning grounds for shrimp, crabs and fish," Donovan said. "This project would be an ecological disaster ..."

Zahn said the port wants to help the City of Corpus Christi provide water to port industries. Port industries have said their No. 1 concern is having a reliable source of water available for critical industrial needs, he said.

The desalination idea has been floated at times over the years because periodic droughts have plunged the region's water supply to low levels at times, forcing conservation measures.

Zahn said the port, itself, doesn't want to build or operate a desalination plant but wants to obtain a permit and allow the City of Corpus Christi or a third party to do the building and operating.

"The port is working cooperatively with the City of Corpus Christi to bring a sustainable solution for the region's water supply," Collin said. "Desalination has been determined to



City of Corpus Christi and the port authority are currently drafting an interlocal agreement to allow the port authority to turn the permits over to the City of Corpus Christi for construction of a desalination plant.”

The port also has applied for permits that would allow for a desalination facility on the La Quinta Channel.

If a desalination facility is put on Harbor Island, it would be located just northwest of the ferry landing, according to the TCEQ notice.

It’s the same parcel where the port is proposing to build a shipping terminal. Zahn said the shipping terminal and a desalination facility could both fit on the same acreage.

The TCEQ received the port’s application on March 7, according to the notice. City Manager Dave Parsons said he received notice of the application in the mail from the TCEQ on Thursday, July 12.

Par sons and Mayor Charles Bujan said they didn’t know fully how to respond because they still late last week were trying to evaluate the proposal.

But Bujan said he was concerned about the possibility of environmental harm.

“My reaction is not going to be kind if it is what it (the notice) says it is,” he said.

The TCEQ will conduct a “technical review” of the application, and then may prepare a draft permit and will issue a preliminary decision on the application, according to the notice.

No deadline has been set yet for submitting public comments, according to Marty Otero, in the media relations office at TCEQ.

“The average processing time for a permit like this is 300 days,” Otero said in response to a question from the South Jetty. “There will be a technical review, then a draft permit will be developed, then a second public notice. Public has 30 days after second public notice to submit public comments or request a public hearing. The process has just started.”

The purpose of a public meeting is to provide an opportunity to submit comments or to ask questions about the application. The TCEQ will hold a public meeting if the agency’s executive director determines that there is a significant degree of public interest in the application or if requested by a local legislator.

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