

DOCKETED

Docket Number:	15-AFC-01
Project Title:	Puente Power Project
TN #:	213949
Document Title:	Philip McKay Comments: We want our beach back
Description:	N/A
Filer:	System
Organization:	Philip McKay
Submitter Role:	Public
Submission Date:	10/11/2016 6:53:25 AM
Docketed Date:	10/11/2016

Comment Received From: Philip McKay

Submitted On: 10/11/2016

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We want our beach back

I am an Oxnard resident who wants our beach back. My wife and I are young professionals who have chosen Oxnard to raise our son. Oxnard has been burdened enough and I look forward to the near future of a beach without a power plant. I surf in these waters and want a better ocean and beach for my son to surf in--one without a power plant.

<http://www.vcstar.com/story/opinion/columnists/2016/10/09/maricela-morales-oxnard-wants-its-beach-back/91751620/>

Maricela Morales: Oxnard wants its beach back

California's population is changing. The very shape of our coast is changing. And now the Coastal Commission charged with representing the public interest in matters of coastal management is changing, too.

Gov. Brown recently signed a law requiring one member of the Coastal Commission to live in and work with communities disproportionately burdened by pollution and other environmental justice issues. The law requires dedicated representation on the commission for low-income areas and communities of color. It also amends the Coastal Act to explicitly require compliance and enforcement of the state's existing civil rights and environmental laws.

These two provisions should help ensure that environmental benefits and burdens are distributed more equally across all groups, regardless of race, ethnicity, national origin, ability, sexual orientation or religion.

This is a moment to celebrate. But it does not erase a history of environmental injustice, in which low-income communities suffer first and worst from industrialization and pollution. Amidst all the media about mega resorts like Banning Ranch, the plight of coastal residents in places like Oxnard has gone largely unnoticed. Oxnard is not fighting against luxury homes. We are fighting for our lives.

Oxnard is a working-class town -- a community of farmworkers, immigrants, young people and families. About 75 percent of residents are Latino, and a third of the population does not speak English.

Big companies look at those statistics and figure we're an easy target for polluting projects that neighboring cities like Santa Barbara and Malibu would never allow. That is how Oxnard came to have more coastal power plants than any other city in California, along with three closed landfills and a metal recycling plant whose toxic legacy we're still cleaning up.

Now, NRG Inc. wants to build a new fossil-fuel power plant next door to an existing plant scheduled for decommissioning by 2020. Just as Oxnard was poised to reclaim some of our coastline from the polluting power industry, this Fortune 500 company proposed a new mega plant between two public parks that serve as the front yard for the many apartment and mobile home dwellers in the area.

Mandalay Beach Park and McGrath State Beach are where Oxnard families go to barbecue, fish and seek fresh air and quiet. But these parks are full of the noise and fumes from dirty industries. Our community hoped the people and parks would be relieved of this burden when the current power plant closes.

The Coastal Commission last month recommended against building the proposed Puente Power Plant at Mandalay State Beach. Commissioners were concerned about impacts to wetland plants and birds, as well as flood risks as the sea level rises. Those are important considerations. I've watched those wetlands suffer from decades of toxic runoff and have seen that beach under water during storms and seasonal high tides. Building new infrastructure there would go against everything in the city's coastal plan.

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The commission, however, missed perhaps the most important consideration in this case: the impacts to our people. Commissioners said they could not legally consider environmental justice because it was not part of the Coastal Act, notwithstanding the commission's own 2015 sea level report that addresses environmental justice.

This erroneous notion has dogged our community for decades. Existing federal and state laws guarantee equal access to publicly funded resources and prohibit discrimination based on race, color, national origin and income. The law Gov. Brown just signed re-emphasizes the commission's responsibility to apply those laws to coastal decisions.

For Oxnard, this is not the end of the story. The Coastal Commission has recommended an alternative location for the power plant, but the decision now rests with the California Energy Commission. I urge the governor and Coastal Commission to provide leadership in this site process.

If we want to make sure environmental benefits and burdens are shared equally across communities, Oxnard is a perfect place to draw a line in the sand. After decades of exploitation, the community is working hard to restore and reclaim our beach. Environmental justice demands that we find another location for the Puente plant and that a clean-energy plant be designed.

Affluent white and working-class Latino communities have at least one thing in common: We want to be at the forefront of clean, renewable energy, not at the tail end of dirty fossil fuel.

Maricela Morales is executive director of the Central Coast Alliance for a Sustainable Economy, or CAUSE.