

Minnesota Environmental Partnership



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

January 9, 2014

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Wisconsin dismisses controversial oil terminal permit application, for now

Proposal would open the door to tar sands shipping on the Great Lakes

(January 9, 2014, Duluth, MN) A plan to begin shipping tar sands oil and other crude across Lake Superior – and potentially open the door to shipping large volumes of this relatively new form of thick crude across the Great Lakes -- has been dealt a setback for now.

The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources in December dismissed an application for a loading dock rehabilitation meant to facilitate shipments of tar sands crude across Lake Superior starting next year. As the first permit to pave the way for tar sands shipping on the Great Lakes, the proposal had broad implications for the region.

Before the project can proceed, the Wisconsin DNR has instead ordered a comprehensive Environmental Assessment of the dock project, something many called for during a public informational hearing in November attended by about 50 residents of Wisconsin and Minnesota.

“Area residents really care about Lake Superior and they want to make sure this unique resource is not threatened by costly and harmful spills of this dangerous type of crude oil,” said Andrew Slade, Northeast Program Coordinator for the Minnesota Environmental Partnership. “This demonstrates how when citizens speak up on such important water issues, government agencies can actually respond.”

The applicant, Elkhorn Industries, may re-apply for the permit under conditions set by the Wisconsin DNR in its Dec. 23, 2013 letter to the company. The letter says public comments from the meeting played a role in its decision, and states that the agency “will need significantly more information about the plans and activities proposed for the site.”

“We want to thank Wisconsin DNR for agreeing that more information is needed, and to the members of the public who really helped make this change, said Lyman Welch, Water Quality Program director for the Alliance for the Great Lakes. “This gives the community – and the region – much-needed time for a larger binational discussion about whether the Great Lakes should become the next frontier for shipping tar sands crude oil.”

Welch is the lead author of a report released in November (www.greatlakes.org/tarsands) that explores the potential ecological harm of tar sands oil shipping across the Great Lakes. The report found that neither the Great Lakes shipping fleet nor its ports were designed to ship this form of crude over the lakes, and highlighted the proven challenges of cleanup after a spill.

The Wisconsin DNR cited two other issues as having a role in its dismissal of the application, including that Elkhorn Industries did not own the entire waterfront property necessary to complete the project and could not legally apply for work on the property it did not own.

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About Minnesota Environmental Partnership

Minnesota Environmental Partnership is a coalition of more than 70 environmental, conservation, and civic organizations working together for clean water, clean energy and protection of our Great Outdoors. MEP engages state leaders, unites environmental efforts and helps citizens take action for the Minnesota they love. www.mepartnership.org

About Alliance for the Great Lakes

Formed in 1970, the Alliance for the Great Lakes is the oldest Great Lakes organization in North America. Our mission is to: conserve and restore the world's largest freshwater resource using policy, education and local efforts, ensuring a healthy Great Lakes and clean water for generations of people and wildlife. More about the Alliance for the Great Lakes is online at www.greatlakes.org.