

Sierra Club bases comment on the thickness of a report!

What might you expect? Sierra club are merely paid activists not the intelligentia.

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While the salt dome near here is one of five potential sites to expand the nation's Strategic Petroleum Reserve, Mayor Jimmy White said he is not optimistic about Perry County's chances.

"It is neither logical nor rational to select this salt dome," White said. "Other sites have a better advantage than we do. The only thing going for us is the government is not always logical."

White said he joins area residents in overwhelmingly approving the use of the site as an expansion of the nation's petroleum reserves.

Under the nation's Energy Policy Act of 2005, the Department of Energy has to select a site from among the five in the running by August. The law calls for expanding the nation's reserve by 160 million barrels of petroleum.

Results of the DOE's draft environmental impact study on Richton will be part of a public meeting Wednesday in Richton. The hearing begins at 7 p.m. at City Hall.

Information also will be available on the other four sites. They are: Bruinsburg salt dome near the Mississippi River just south of Vicksburg, Chacahoula and Clovelly in Lafourche Parish, La., and Stratton Ridge in Brazoria County, Texas.

"Why select us?" White said. "We are one of the largest, if not the largest, undeveloped salt domes in the nation."

White said the major problem facing the Richton site is water. If the Richton site is used, water will have to be piped 12 miles from the Leaf River near New Augusta to the salt dome.

"According to preliminary studies, at certain times of the year, like now, there's not enough water in the river for them to use," White said.

Construction time in Richton would be nine to 10 years and include development of two pipelines. One of the pipelines would send crude oil from Pascagoula to Richton, a distance of 83 miles.

A second pipeline would be used to pump the salty water from the Richton site into the Gulf of Mexico. That pipeline would be 96 miles long and extend into the Gulf.

The Richton dome is a 1,500-acre site located off Mississippi 42, west of Richton.

"I think it would be a great thing for this area," said Harold Hinton, whose back yard overlooks the salt dome. "I guess I am about as close to it as anyone, and I support this because Richton needs a boost."

Hinton said he will be at Wednesday's public meeting and so will Craig Marsh, the new owner of Rolling Hills Golf Club which is located across Mississippi 42 from the salt dome.

"I see nothing but great things for this area's future," Marsh said.

But environmentalists say they have serious concerns about the using salt dome.

"One of our major concerns is pumping the salty water into the ocean," said Becky Gillette of Ocean Springs, a former Hattiesburg resident. "We believe that could have an impact on marine life by creating a dead zone where nothing can live."

Gillette, who co-chairs the Sierra Club's Mississippi chapter, said the group also has a problem with the environmental impact statement.

"It's very thin so I am concerned they rushed this through because of the time," she said. "I've seen a lot thicker report on a lot smaller project."

The Richton site was studied in the late 1970s as a possible storage site for nuclear waste and again in the early 1990s as a petroleum storage site.

David Johnson, the U.S. Department of Energy project manager for the Mississippi sites, said the target date to select the winning site is Aug. 25.

"The project will bring jobs to the site selected," Johnson said. "During the major construction period between 500 and 600 people will be employed in building the infrastructure and the site."

After the pipelines are built to the Mississippi Gulf Coast, about 100 people would be hired to wash out a cavern in the salt to hold the crude oil.