

Fate of Idaho megaloads hangs at stake at hearings

Associated Press April 25, 2011

BOISE, Idaho (AP) — The fate of ExxonMobil's plan to haul massive shipments of oil refinery equipment along U.S. Highway 12 in north central Idaho is at stake in a hearing that started Monday with objections from residents and business owners along the route.

The hearing, expected to last at least four days, is the latest challenge to the plan by ExxonMobil subsidiary Imperial Oil to ship giant loads of equipment from the port in Lewiston, into Montana and ultimately to the Kearl Oil Sands in southern Alberta, Canada.

The company initially projected transporting more than 200 shipments on the scenic roadway, generally along the route of the historic Lewis and Clark expedition. But in recent months, it has found a way to reduce the size of dozens of shipments and reroute the smaller loads along a different, less controversial path.

Early in Monday's hearing, Reflections Inn owner Ruth May said she believes the remaining shipments along U.S. 12 — to be conducted at night, when traffic is sparse — will delay and complicate efforts by her guests to get to her hotel east of Kooskia.

Others were concerned about the trucks occupying the public turnouts during the day, spaces normally used by anglers or rafting outfitters who need quick and easy access to the popular Lochsa and Clearwater rivers that parallel the highway. Roads and bridges will be damaged, safety compromised and lives inconvenienced, they argue.

"I think it's putting my business, my home, my long-term investment in jeopardy," May said.

The Idaho Transportation Department already has approved a traffic control plan submitted by the company, but it delayed issuing the permits pending the hearing's outcome and a recommendation by hearing officer Duff McKee. The department appointed McKee to preside after opponents challenged the decision to issue the permits.

On Monday, McKee hinted that the case — regardless of how he decides — is likely headed for court.

Reymundo Rodriguez, head of the Idaho Transportation Department division that issues permits for oversized loads, told McKee about the process his agency goes through before such a permit is issued. Rodriguez has concluded that Highway 12 was the only possible route for the large shipments from Lewiston, given that their size make them too big to be directed elsewhere.

Reducing the size of the big shipments further would be too expensive, with each such effort estimated by ExxonMobil to take between 2,000 and 4,000 man-hours of work and cost \$500,000.

Economic development proponents including Port of Lewiston manager David Doeringsfeld said the port is currently at one of its busiest periods in its history, with 250 ExxonMobil workers now preparing the shipments for transport as soon as state approval is granted. He blames environmental groups including Idaho Rivers United for organizing opposition to a project he sees as important to the region's financial well-being.

"Highway 12 is a U.S. highway," said Doeringsfeld, who attended Monday's hearing. "This case could be precedent-setting, with ... environmental groups dictating what travels over U.S. Highways."

Idaho Rivers United has criticized Gov. C.L. "Butch" Otter for not doing more to inform local residents about the megaloads, calling it "backroom deal-making" that threatens rivers used by anglers, rafters and kayakers. In early March the group filed a lawsuit against the U.S. Forest Service, saying it had abdicated its responsibility to protect a river corridor covered by the federal Wild & Scenic Rivers Act.

Exxon Mobil officials will likely testify later in the week.

"We will outline the years of careful planning and steps we have taken to ensure that this equipment can be transported safely and with minimal disruption to the public," said Exxon spokeswoman Cynthia Bergman White. "Our plan calls for moving one module per day in the middle of the night, moving at 15 mph."

The Idaho Transportation Department is currently monitoring an Imperial Oil test run, which left Lewiston earlier this month but has caused some problems along the way. On the first night, the truck hauling a 500,000-pound load clipped and snapped a cable anchoring a high-voltage power line, setting off a chain reaction that shorted a power line and cut the electricity to 1,300 customers in the towns of Pierce and Weippe.

The Imperial loads are following the same route used by another oil company, ConocoPhillips, to get heavy equipment to its refinery in Billings, Mont. The first of four, 300-ton ConocoPhillips shipments arrived in Billings earlier this month, completing a 65-day journey that was delayed by weather and mechanical malfunctions.

Copyright © 2011 The Associated Press. All rights reserved.

Related articles

- [New Idaho Megaloads Hearings Address More Than 200 Truckloads](#)
New West - 5 hours ago
- [Big Oil Leaves a Trail of Broken Promises through the Northern Rockies](#)
Change.org (blog) - 8 hours ago

- [Judge begins taking testimony in megaloads case](#)
Moscow-Pullman Daily News - 8 hours ago

AP Associated Press



A panel of lawyers including Richard Hart (foreground), an attorney for Mammoet USA, listens as River Dance Lodge owner Peter Grubb testifies, left, on Monday, April 25, 2011, during an Idaho Transportation Department hearing in Boise. The hearing, expected to last at least four days, is the latest challenge to the plan by ExxonMobil subsidiary Imperial Oil to ship giant loads of equipment from the port in Lewiston, into Montana and ultimately to the Kearl Oil Sands in southern Alberta, Canada. (AP Photo/John Miller)

Map

