

(July 20, 2007) Chicago Suntimes Editorial: Sink BP's waste plan

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BP's plan to dump more waste into Lake Michigan needs to be plugged up. Even if the giant oil company proves that the extra waste it will be dumping is no threat to aquatic life or humans, we must have zero tolerance for the release of any additional pollution into our precious lake waters. Lake Michigan is a vital resource for Chicagoans -- it provides our drinking water and our beach recreation, and it inspires the soul of our city with a water border, 30 miles long. Polluting its waters affects us all.

BP recently won a permit from Indiana that will allow it to discharge 54 percent more ammonia and 35 percent more solid waste into the lake from its water treatment plant at its Whiting refinery. The company -- which made \$22.3 billion last year -- says the higher limits will enable it to move forward with a \$3 billion expansion of the refinery so it can process more Canadian heavy crude oil.

News of Indiana's action caught Chicago and Illinois officials by surprise and spurred a strong reaction. Representatives Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) and Daniel Lipinski (D-Ill.) said they would try to block the expansion unless it includes better pollution controls. Chicago officials, meanwhile, will be asking people along the lakefront to sign a petition this weekend demanding that Indiana reverse its decision. The city is also exploring its legal options and hiring a consultant to review the permit.

BP, and Indiana, have plenty to say in their defense. BP is spending \$150 million to upgrade its water treatment plant. The oil company argues that the extra pollutants are still within the safety range set by federal and state regulators. The solid waste isn't very solid -- it is actually diluted so much that it is not visible in the treated wastewater. To further dilute the treated water, it will be released not at the shore but about 200 feet into the lake. And, the company says, the average discharges from the refinery will typically be less than that allowed by the permit.

Fine. But it's still more pollution. And we're still not convinced that BP is doing everything it can to keep it out of the lake. With all the billions it's spending on the refinery project, it's hard to believe that BP can't do more.

A greater point is that this is the first time in years that a company has been allowed to dump more pollutants of this kind into the lake. More than a hundred years ago, when the Whiting refinery was built, environmental concerns took a back seat to industry. Cleaning up the pollution in our lakes and rivers has taken decades and billions of dollars, and we still have a ways to go.

Now is no time to be going backward.