

# Williams College-Mystic Seaport Maritime Studies Program's Marine and Coastal Policy Research Group

## The Future of the Liquified Natural Gas Facility in Tacoma, WA

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Puget Sound Energy and Port of Tacoma are proposing Liquified Natural Gas (LNG) as a transitory solution to bunker fuel for large ships. With the climate changing more and more rapidly, there is the constant hope of new solutions to mitigate some of the damage caused by fossil fuels. However, LNG is primarily methane gas which is sourced from fracking.

One current approach to reduce dependence on fossil fuels is building the proposed LNG facility at the Port of Tacoma. LNG is a fossil fuel but considered cleaner than diesel. However, if the facility, or any of the equipment to get the LNG to the facility were to leak or break it would cause serious environmental issues. There are also treaty rights that have not been considered. The Puyallup Tribe of Indians has the right to meaningful consultation, and the City of Tacoma has not met this requirement yet. Port of Tacoma should not build this facility, but if they go ahead with the plans, there should be more meaningful consultation and more investment in truly clean fuels.



*TOTE Maritime ship (Source: Tote Maritime)*

### ISSUE CONTEXT:

#### *Stakeholders*

The Puyallup Tribe of Indians is the main stakeholder in this issue. The 1854 Medicine Creek Treaty with the Puyallup Tribe of Indians whose homeland the facility is built on requires the City of Tacoma to have meaningful consultation with the tribe about any proposed building projects. The

WILLIAMS-MYSTIC  
RESEARCHER

Hazel Atwill  
Smith College



Port of Tacoma LNG plant (Source: Port of Tacoma)

Boldt decision in the United States District Court for the Western District of Washington provides right of access to native fishing grounds for many tribes, including the Puyallup Tribe of Indians, as well as deciding that the local tribes were entitled to half of the fish harvest each year.

Port of Tacoma and Puget Sound Energy are invested in this project to build a facility to service TOTE Maritime vessels for their Alaska-Tacoma shipping line.

There are communities affected by fracking for the LNG that are outside of the South Sound region that would be impacted but the increased need for LNG. The methane for this project would be sourced from British Columbia or Alberta but come through British Columbia.

To engage with the public PSE mailed out informational pamphlets and Port of Tacoma held public forums. There were many protests since the project was announced.

### Sustainability

The environmental impact statement considered issues such as potential spill of LNG, effects related to seismic other geologic hazards, management of on-site subsurface contamination during construction, effects on regional air quality, including greenhouse gas emissions. The main reason this plant is being built is to serve the TOTE maritime company, who operates a primary shipping line between Tacoma and Alaska. It will also provide peak shaving and use LNG to heat residents homes in very cold spells.

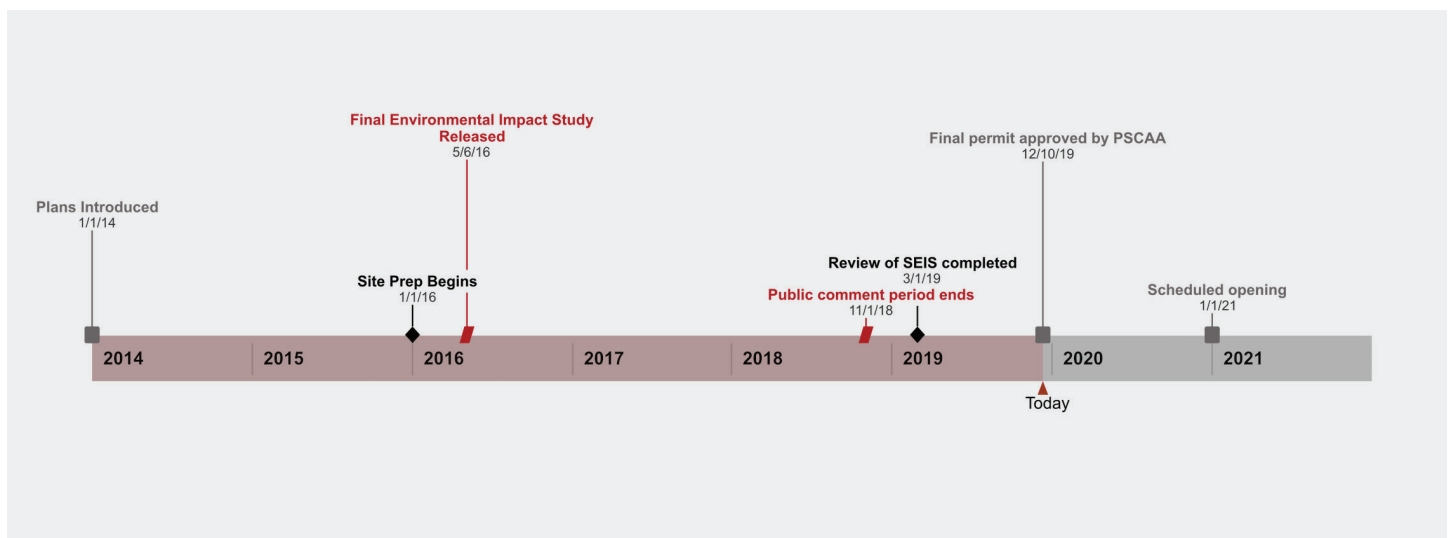
With little precedent, the Department of Ecology delegated the environmental impact study to the City of Tacoma. The final permit was approved by the Puget Sound Clean Air Agency on December 10, 2019, but further appeals are expected.

### CRITIQUE:

#### Stakeholder engagement:

This facility would provide more Port of Tacoma jobs, during construction and after completion. It would also provide local citizens with more efficient heating during very cold months.

The Puyallup Tribe of Indians have treaty rights that require City of Tacoma to have meaningful consultation about any large decisions that will affect salmon runs or their historic homeland. There are also other tribes in Puget Sound area that have meaningful consultation rights and none of them were consulted. Any conversation that happened with the Puyallup Tribe of Indians happened after the EIS and permits were approved. They needed to be part of the process before anything started.





*Port of Tacoma with Mt. Rainier in the background. (Source: [https://www.multicare.org/files/library/port-tacoma\\_vfs.jpg](https://www.multicare.org/files/library/port-tacoma_vfs.jpg))*

The citizens that would be affected by this project were engaged through voter pamphlets by Puget Sound Energy (PSE) and websites about the facility by PSE and Port of Tacoma. There were also public forums, with varying degrees of success. Some citizens feel like they were given a time and space to give their opinions, while others feel like they were not given enough information to have an opinion. Mr. Wolf Opitz says that he attended many public meetings that were held by the city. Others, like Dr. JD Fitz, feel like the information they were given by Puget Sound Energy was incomplete and did not address concerns about the safety of the plant and potential environmental impacts. Other citizens feel that there was a “build it and apologize for it later” feel to the project and was not respectful of citizens or the Puyallup Tribe of Indians. Citizens who remain opposed to the project attended the many protests standing solidarity with the Puyallup Tribe of Indians. There was also a hashtag that was used on social media, especially Instagram, #NoLNG253, that was used to raise

awareness outside the Tacoma region, and to show how much of the population was against the project.

#### *Sustainability:*

The pros include becoming a more sustainable port by moving away from using bunker fuel. Since the main line would be used for ships travelling up to Alaska, it would be good for there to be less pollution in the Arctic.

Some of the many cons include potential leaks of LNG. Methane is notoriously hard to transport without any leaks at many steps in the extraction and transportation process. Leaks are also possible and relevant in being used by ships. LNG is gathered through fracking, which is known to be harmful to the groundwater, and can increase earthquakes. Puget Sound Energy has not acknowledged how harmful fracking is, and by doing so is ignoring the environmental impact their project has. There was a similar facility in Eastern Washington that had

issues in 2014 with an explosion in the pipelines on the site that injured 5 workers and caused evacuations because of LNG and natural gas leakage. Puget Sound Energy is not considering this as a cautionary tale because it was not the actual LNG facility at Plymouth that caused the explosion. However, there would be 4 new miles of pipeline that caused the problem would be going through the busy urban center of Tacoma, not a very rural part of the state. If there were to be a similar issue in Tacoma there is no evacuation plan for the migrant detention center nearby that houses over 1,000 people because PSE says the possibility of any leak or damage is too small for this to be necessary.

There has also been discussion of the possibility that a facet of what Port of Tacoma is planning has to do with future export - not just fueling TOTE Maritime ships because of the scale of the project and the need for peak shaving.

The science around the calculations that were instrumental in the EIS being approved has been proven outdated by many different organizations. If this science is indeed faulty, it will impact the rights of the Puyallup and Nisqually tribes. They have fishing rights that would be severely impeded by the destruction and pollution of vital habitat.

#### **POLICY OPTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS:**

My official recommendation is to not build a liquefied gas plant in downtown Tacoma, WA. If this project were to continue there would need to be meaningful consultation with The Puyallup Tribe of Indians as well as the other tribes with treaty rights. The environmental impact study needs to be reevaluated. Fracking is an unavoidable part of this deal and cannot be ignored. Even if the gas comes from Canada, it comes from fracking. Environmental activists in Tacoma are worried about what would happen for their water and air quality, as well as the communities the fracking is happening because the environment impacts us all. This facility should not happen, and truly clean energy should be invested in.

#### **ENDNOTES**

##### Endnotes

- 1 United States v. Washington, 384 F. Supp. 312 (W.D. Wash. 1974), aff'd, 520 F.2d 676 (9th Cir. 1975)
- 2 Debbie Cockrell "LNG site resumes permit process after new report backs findings of earlier review" (March 29, 2019) (<https://www-1.thenewtribune.com/news/local/article228605034.html>, accessed Nov 2019)
- 3 City of Tacoma Planning and Development Services "Tacoma Liquefied Natural Gas Facility Summary of Final Environmental Impact Statement" 2-21 (May 5, 2016)
- 4 Puget Sound Energy, PSE Tacoma Liquefied Natural Gas [<http://www.tacomacleanlng.com/faqs>] (accessed Nov/Dec 2019)
- 5 Phone interview with Michael Thompson, Puyallup Tribe of Indians Communications Director, Puyallup, WA (Nov 8, 2019).
- 6 Email Correspondence from Wolf Opitz, Citizen, Tacoma, WA (Nov 9, 2019).
- 7 Email Correspondence from Dr. JD Fitz, Citizen, Tacoma, WA (Nov 11, 2019).
- 8 Telephone interview with John Atwill, Citizen, Tacoma, WA (Nov 7, 2019)
- 9 Phone interview with Erin Dilworth, Policy and Technical Project Manager with Citizens for a Healthy Bay, Tacoma, WA (Nov 6, 2019).
- 10 Citizens for a Healthy Bay, Liquefied Natural Gas and What It Means for Tacoma [[www.healthybay.org/work/tacomalng](http://www.healthybay.org/work/tacomalng)] (accessed Nov/Dec 2019)
- 11 Phone interview with Michael Thompson, Puyallup Tribe of Indians Communications Director, Puyallup, WA (Nov 8, 2019).
- 12 Puget Sound Energy, PSE Tacoma Liquefied Natural Gas [<http://www.tacomacleanlng.com/faqs>] (accessed Nov/Dec 2019)
- 13 Phone interview with Michael Thompson, Puyallup Tribe of Indians Communications Director, Puyallup, WA (Nov 8, 2019).
- 14 Sightline Institute, Powell, T., How Industry and Regulators Kept Public in the Dark After 2014 LNG Explosion in Washington [<https://www.sightline.org/2016/02/08/how-industry-and-regulators-kept-public-in-the-dark-after-2014-lng-explosion-in-washington/>]
- 15 Puget Sound Energy, PSE Tacoma Liquefied Natural Gas [<http://www.tacomacleanlng.com/faqs>] (accessed Nov/Dec 2019)
- 16 Phone interview with Michael Thompson, Puyallup Tribe of Indians Communications Director, Puyallup, WA (Nov 8, 2019).
- 17 Citizens for a Healthy Bay, Liquefied Natural Gas and What It Means for Tacoma [[www.healthybay.org/work/tacomalng](http://www.healthybay.org/work/tacomalng)] (accessed Nov/Dec 2019)
- 18 Phone interview with Michael Thompson, Puyallup Tribe of Indians Communications Director, Puyallup, WA (Nov 8, 2019).