

Impact study downplays minuses of Formosa plant

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A preliminary impact statement for a proposed Formosa Plastics Corp. plant in St. John the Baptist Parish says the plant would adversely affect tourism, traffic and the environment — but that the intrusion would be minimized by buffer zones and environmental guidelines.

The draft environmental impact statement says that if the Environmental Protection Agency and state Department of

Environmental Quality refuse to license the plant, the area would lose tax revenue, thousands of jobs and the restoration of the nearly 200-year-old Whitney Plantation house and compound.

Formosa wants to build the world's largest pulp and rayon plant in the west bank community of Wallace.

The proposed \$700 million plant to make the rayon fiber has been controversial from the beginning. Opponents claim it will foul the environment and wreck River Road tourism; proponents say it will provide a

much-needed economic boost to St. John's mostly impoverished west bank.

Walk, Haydel & Associates of New Orleans is preparing the study for the EPA. Formosa is paying for it.

A copy of the preliminary draft, submitted to EPA last spring, recently was obtained by a consortium of environmental groups using a Freedom of Information Act request. One of the groups gave a copy to The Times-Picayune.

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"We wanted to see what was going on. EPA doesn't publish (the completed environmental impact statement) until it's too late," said Nathalie Walker, managing attorney of the Sierra Club's Louisiana office.

Formosa Vice President Alden Andre said the study is "very crude and preliminary." But the Sierra Club, among other groups, has taken issue with it.

"It's pretty sad," Walker said. The group has planned a press conference tonight in Wallace to discuss its concerns.

Among the Sierra Club's contentions:

- ▶ The preliminary study says the plant might discharge chloroform and dioxin into the river. The two are chemicals used in bleaching pulp wood and reducing it to fiber.
- ▶ Formosa's environmental record at its

plants in other parts of the United States isn't included. EPA spokesman Roger Meacham said Monday that while the agency plans to consider Formosa's past record, it isn't a requirement that it be included in the study.

▶ The preliminary study doesn't say which chemicals the plant will release into the air. Andre said that information wasn't included because the company's air permit is incomplete. "It will be addressed," he said.

Andre said the document the Sierra Club objected to is "a very incomplete draft."

Walk, Haydel's final impact statement is due in December.

EPA is likely to decide early next year whether to permit the plant.

The preliminary study says if the EPA were to turn down the plant, an industry-free "green belt" from Vacherie, La., to St. Charles Parish would remain unchanged, and any possible harm to people, the

environment, or plantation homes like Whitney and nearby Evergreen would be eliminated.

But it also calls the adverse impacts minor and insignificant and warns that 1,000 permanent jobs would be lost, that Whitney's buildings would continue to deteriorate, and that the community would remain impoverished.

Formosa plans to renovate Whitney and open it to the public as it builds the plant.

The study says that while people who live at the edge of the proposed plant might suffer some adverse effects, the community by and large favors it.

It says an "industrial appearance could not realistically be hidden from River Road," but that the effect would be "mitigated" through buffer zones, trees and shrubs and a minimum setback from River Road of 360 feet.

It also says any lost tourism will be made up by additional tour companies visiting Whitney once it is renovated.