Bay Area climate change rule to curb refinery gases delayed

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Precedent-setting cap on oil refinery emissions delayed
The Shell oil refinery in Martinez, seen from across the Carquinez Strait in Benicia.

The Shell oil refinery in Martinez, is one of five oil refineries in the Bay Area. (Doug Duran/Staff)

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SAN FRANCISCO – Bay Area air regulators on Wednesday postponed adopting the nation’s first limits on greenhouse gases from oil refineries because of complaints that the public wasn’t given enough time to review 11th-hour changes.

With both environmentalists and oil company workers complaining of insufficient notice, the Bay Area Air Quality Management District board agreed to wait at least two months before limiting overall annual greenhouse gas emissions from the five refineries in the region.

The vote to delay was 13 to 6.

Air board members and their advisers said the rule is needed to prevent oil refineries from switching to dirtier crude oil sources like Canadian tar sands petroleum that could increase greenhouse gas emissions.

“This rule is a backstop for increasing greenhouse gas emissions,” said Eric Stevenson, the air pollution district’s director of measurement and rules. “This is a cutting-edge rule, the first in the nation.”

An audience of 300 people was sharply divided.

Many environmentalists said caps are urgently needed, but they said the air district staff’s last-minute amendments dramatically weakened the rule, and did it without adequate time for the public to study or comment on the changes.

“This is not a cap, but a massive increase in refinery emissions,” said Jed Holtzman, a leader of Bay Area 350, a climate protection group. “If you can’t cap emissions, how are you going to reduce them?”

Oil company workers and representatives opposed the cap as a threat to their jobs.
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