Benicia Planning Commission
Hearing on Valero Crude By Rail
September 11, 2014
Comments by Shoshana Wechsler

Members of the Planning Commission, good Citizens of Benicia,

I thank you for this opportunity to comment on Valero's proposal, which has immense consequences for all of us living in the Bay Area, throughout northern California, and, in reality, the entire spinning planet.

I was born and raised in Solano County and currently live in west Contra Costa, a few miles from the Chevron refinery. I'm here to ask you to do the hard, but ethically necessary thing, and veto the project that Valero proposes. The City of Benicia has set admirable community-wide Greenhouse Gas reduction goals. But all your local mitigation measures will mean absolutely nothing if you vote on the side of quick profit and extreme gas and oil extraction.

The World Meteorological Organization just announced that greenhouse gasses in the atmosphere reached a record high in 2013. And CO_2 levels increased more between 2012 and 2013 than during any other year since 1984.

According to the DEIR, Valero's project will somehow miraculously buck this negative trend. Section 4.6 assures us the project is GHG-neutral. "Trains travelling between the Refinery and North American oil fields [will] generate locomotive emissions," but "to understand the Project's net impact on climate change . . . one must consider . . . maritime emissions . . . the Project would eliminate."

The DEIR is not an objective scientific document, however. It's a carefully constructed, extended argument that employs cherry-picked evidence—and the careful use of omissions—to argue, baldly, that the substitution of rail for marine transport eliminates worrisome GHG emissions.

But is that really the end of the story? And what about the beginning of the story, the place where that transported oil is extracted?

Perhaps some of you have seen those amazing NASA satellite images of the U.S. at night. The eastern seaboard blazes with light and then plunges into the darkness of the Great Plains. But in the northwest corner of the plains is a sudden explosion like neon fireworks that eclipses even Chicago and New York.

These are the fracking fields of North Dakota. The light we see comes from gas flares from thousands of shale oil rigs planted all over the Bakken formation. That's right—the flaring of natural gas, methane, shooting into the atmosphere because the industry on the

ground has decided it's just too expensive to capture it. The real prize is the light, sweet oil that's loaded onto trains and is coming soon to Benicia, if Valero has its way.

So what's wrong with this picture? Well, it's this. Methane is an extremely powerful greenhouse gas that's far more potent than CO2. It disappears relatively quickly—its power to trap heat is concentrated in a short, intense burst. But within a 25-year period—the period in which we get our act together or lose the climate game—methane has its greatest effect, trapping 86-times more solar radiation than CO_2 can. For this and other reasons unique to fracking, Bakken crude is highly carbon-intensive. And yet nowhere in the DEIR is the carbon intensity of the oil itself, before refining, factored into GHG calculations. On this crucial subject the DEIR remains silent.

An honest assessment would account for the entire process, from beginning to end, from extraction to refining to burning. Climate impacts don't begin and end at the California border, or at the margins of the Bay Area basin. Nor is the carbon-intensive fracked oil carried by rail identical to the conventionally extracted oil arriving by ship. Again, let's remember the warning of the WMO. Last year, in 2013, concentration of CO_2 in the atmosphere was 142% of the pre-industrial amount. Methane was 253%. We're moving in exactly the wrong direction.

The eye-dazzling blaze from North Dakota's fracking fields is as glorious as Vegas when seen from the aerial view. But do we really want to gamble with the very future of our planet in order to conduct business as usual?

9/11/2014