

Shrimpers charge plant expansion is a potential fish kill

By Chip Brown
Associated Press

Shrimpers and environmentalists hauled a coffin to Gov. Ann Richards' office Thursday to protest a plastics company permit that they say will devastate the shrimping industry.

Opponents of a state permit granted to Formosa Plastics Corp. for expansion of its Point Comfort plant say the company will contaminate Lavaca and Matagorda Bays, which are southeast of Victoria and serve as habitats for shrimp on the Gulf Coast.

Formosa officials defended the permit, which will allow the plant to discharge up to 15 million gallons of water a day into upper Lavaca Bay.

"The people who are protesting today have resorted to theater because they cannot make their case, and they rely upon information that is inaccurate and is misleading," said Formosa spokesman Joe Wyatt.

Members of the Texas and Vietnamese Shrimping associations and the environmental groups Greenpeace and Texans United lugged a black coffin containing a shrimp net to the governor's office.

They were met by Margaret Justus, a spokeswoman who promised to relay their concerns to the governor, who was traveling in East Texas on Thursday.

Formosa has a history of environmental fines. Its plant in Point Comfort produces polyvinyl chloride, which involves cancer-causing agents such as benzene in the production process.

Critics say they fear the contaminants will seep into the water discharged from the plant.

Wyatt says the water will be purer than the bay water.

"This water, which is primarily rain water, will go through a water treatment plant and will have less salinity (salt) in it than the average salinity already in the bay," he said.

Jim Sagnes of the Texas Shrimping Association says the state's billion-dollar shrimping industry stands to lose millions of dollars and thousands of jobs if the plant is allowed to discharge more water into the bays.

"By the Texas Water Commission allowing the discharge of the effluent out of Formosa Plastics and into the bay system, it potentially will kill the bay system," Sagnes said.

"The Department of Health has already said they will close the bay system to oyster harvest. Formosa Plastics fails to understand there are other creatures in that bay system, namely shrimp," he said.

Diane Wilson, a member of Calhoun County Resource Watch, says Formosa's permit will "constitute a \$140 million loss annually to the local economy and the potential death of the entire fisheries in upper La-



Staff photo by Tom Lankes

Diana Wilson and other protesters rally around a coffin to protest a permit for a plastics company.

vaca Bay."

Wilson, who says she has been battling Formosa for a decade, vowed to file a motion for a temporary restraining order against the plant in district court. She also planned to submit petitions to the Water Commission to appeal the permit.

"The state has done nothing to help us and everything to hurt us," Wilson said. "At this point, I just want to know what part of 'No' Gov. Richards doesn't understand."

But Justus said Richards has received assurances from the Water Commission that the permit will be strictly enforced. She also said the commission was meeting with Formosa officials about recycling the wastewater.

The upper Lavaca Bay is a primary shrimping location for Vietnamese shrimpers.

Thanz Vantran, of the Vietnamese Shrimping Association, said he feels he is being taken advantage of because he does not have the political clout that Formosa has.

"This permit is very bad to all the shrimpers," Vantran said. "It will ruin my business."