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Fracking project gets water quality certification from DEQ

Fracking site in St. Tammany

The site where Helis Oil has proposed a drilling fracking project near Mandeville. The site was photographed on Wednesday, July 30, 2014. (Photo by Chris Granger, Nola.com | The Times-Picayune) (*NOLA.com | The Times-Picayune archive*)

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A proposed oil drilling and fracking project in St. Tammany Parish received a water quality certification from the state on Thursday (March 19), moving the controversial project a step forward. After reviewing Helis Oil & Gas Co.'s plans, the state Department of Environmental Quality ruled the project will not violate state water quality standards and is in accordance with Louisiana's Water Quality Management Plan and all applicable laws and regulations.

The project, which is **being challenged in court**, still needs a wetlands permit from the Army Corps of Engineers.

In its decision, **DEQ** said it had denied several organizations' requests for a public hearing on Helis' application for the water quality certification. Those organizations included the Gulf Restoration Network.

"The evaluation concluded there are no significant water quality issues associated with the exploratory vertical well project as proposed," DEQ wrote.

A spokesman for Helis said Thursday the company was pleased with DEQ's decision.

"Helis has a strong commitment to protecting and preserving water quality in St. Tammany Parish," spokesman Greg Beuerman said. "We are pleased with the department's actions which allow us to keep making progress on this important energy initiative."

DEQ responded to a number of public comments about the proposed project, including concerns about possible water pollution and the sources of the 800,000 gallons Helis expects to use.

Helis will not use surface pits to store any production waste or drill cuttings of any kind, DEQ noted. A self-contained, closed loop mud system will be used, it said.

The company will use collected stormwater as much as possible, DEQ said, with the rest of the needed

water being brought in by truck from private ponds located within 3 to 5 miles of the drill site northeast of Mandeville.

Helis wants to drill a vertical well on undeveloped land just north of Interstate 12 and east of Louisiana 1088. If the data from the well is promising, the company said it would then seek approvals to drill horizontally and use the controversial hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, process to release oil from a shale formation.

Helis already has a drilling permit from the state Office of Conservation.

Many citizens and some public officials oppose the project due to concerns that include pollution, lower property values and the industrialization of the parish.

St. Tammany Parish government and the town of Abita Springs have filed lawsuits in hopes of blocking the drilling. The citizens group Concerned Citizens of St. Tammany is an intervenor in the parish's lawsuit.

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