

House of Commons

Oral Answers and Debates

Planning (Location of Hazardous Sites)

3.32 pm

Bob Spink (Castle Point) (Con): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require the introduction of binding guidance regarding minimum distances between developments classified as Control of Major Accident Hazard sites and other specified types of building; and for connected purposes.

This Bill seeks to improve protection for communities across Britain from the new development of potentially dangerous industrial sites. It will ensure increased safety by giving the Health and Safety Executive a framework for COMAH plant siting decisions, thereby improving the consistency of such decisions and affording a predetermined level of protection for communities.

As if we in Castle Point had not had enough, Oikos registered on 21 December a new application for biodiesel and glycerine plants. The plants, which are expected to produce 163,500 tonnes a year, are sited very close to houses. Feed stocks would be imported from ships in the Thames and there would be massive on-site storage of oils, fats, reacting agents and end products. The local council and the HSE will be working closely with me and with the organisation People Against Methane to protect our community, and residents will be fully consulted about the Oikos proposals.

I have fought to defend my constituents from the massive risk posed by Calor's proposals for a liquefied natural gas facility next door to the Oikos site. Calor wants to import around 5 per cent. of the UK's total LNG needs and to store about 100,000 tonnes on site. The LNG would be offloaded from ships by means of a boom arm on a jetty on a waterway where activity is increasing massively, thanks to the new Thames Gateway port development just downstream and the Oikos proposal.

Calor's plans were withdrawn as a result of a strong campaign in this House, inputs from the HSE and the Environment Agency, and local efforts by People Against Methane. The Canvey Island Independent party's huge petition, which I presented in this House, was also most helpful. We have put politics aside in Castle Point and worked together to defeat the Calor proposals, and we shall do so again, but Calor says that it will reapply this year. I shall continue my fight to protect my constituents.

We were told that the Buncefield depot was totally safe, but it turned into the biggest fire in western Europe since world war two, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Mr. Lilley) explained to the House last week. A similar fire, but involving LNG rather than petrol, would make Buncefield look like a village bonfire night party. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hemel Hempstead (Mike Penning) on his excellent debate last week—he is doing a superb job of fighting for his constituents. He described one of his constituents' homes after the explosion as:

“blown to smithereens. It looked like someone had dropped a 1,000 lb bomb next to his house. I have visited the site. The house is gone—it does not exist”.

He went on to say:

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“May I also praise him”-

that is, me-

“for his quick response before Christmas when the hydrocracker at the Coryton refinery exploded?...I know the fears that exist, and I am conscious that my hon. Friend did not go in

the opposite direction; he went straight down to see the firefighters to ensure that they, too, were looked after.

To answer my hon. Friend's question, when the first explosion took place at Buncefield, the damage occurred several kilometres away...he will find that because there was nothing structurally to prevent the explosion spreading outwards, or the subsequent suction inwards after the oxygen had been used up, properties...several kilometres away, were subject to serious structural damage. One school in St. Albans had its central heating boiler sucked up through the flue, which blew up boilers throughout the school...That is the sort of damage that occurs in such explosions."-[*Official Report, Westminster Hall*, 9 January 2008; Vol. 470, c. 75WH.]

Thus, we see graphically the destruction caused even several kilometres away from such an incident. George Whatley of PAM, who originally suggested my Bill, used a satellite navigation system to measure the distance separating the Calor site and homes on Canvey. It is precisely 200 yd. That is totally unacceptable, but there are no official separation limits for COMAH plants; hence the Bill that I am introducing today. An escape of LNG would vaporise and form an unstable, unconfined, highly combustible cloud which, on ignition, would explode and burn at extremely high temperatures, destroying everything in its path. According to the fire service, whereas the Buncefield petrol fire was easily contained, there is no way to contain or control an LNG fire; the fire service would just clear up the carnage afterwards.

International evidence on LNG explosions is legion. Tim Riley's documentary film, "The Risks and Dangers of LNG", and the 2003 Californian study predicting up to 70,000 casualties from an LNG accident or terrorist attack, graphically set out the implications. The Buncefield inquiry led to an HSE investigation, which concludes:

"Clearly we have a poor scientific understanding of the mechanisms which led to the vapour cloud explosion at Buncefield, and we accept that installations storing other substances could present this type of hazard, for example bulk LPG storage, and other flammable liquid storage."

The investigation also reveals a fifteenfold increase in unconfined vapour cloud explosions over the past decade, and it challenges the current orthodoxy on the scale of risk to local communities that are adjacent to large petrol, liquid petroleum gas and LNG sites. The HSE is therefore reviewing its safety and planning advice on the siting of such plants.

United States federal regulations for LNG facilities-CFR 193-federal safety standards and the US National Fire Protection Association lay down that vapour gas dispersion distances must be calculated to determine how far downwind natural gas vapours could travel from an onshore LNG facility and still remain flammable. They show that a fire would burn with intense heat, so LNG plants must have thermal exclusion zones.

The Canvey island site involves additional risk, with LNG transfer from tankers on the Thames-on the water. Distinguished professor Jerry Havens and others have serious concerns about the vulnerability of massive LNG tankers, which could be engulfed in a fire

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and would be unable to fight that fire. The risks of spills on to water are spelled out in the US publication, "Business Briefing: LNG review 2005":

"there would be little or no control over the extent of liquid spreading and the consequent rapid burning or vaporisation of the gas."

A 2004 report by Sandia National Laboratories in the United States concluded that

"cascading failure of LNG vessel containments by this mechanism cannot be ruled out",

which would result in “total loss” of the tankers.

A US fact sheet “Liquified Natural Gas (LNG) Energy Justice.net/natural gas” states that an accident or terrorist attack on an LNG tanker could cause

“major injuries and significant damage to structures a third of a mile away and could cause second-degree burns on people a mile away.”

A congressional panel expressed similar concerns in 2004; Rear-Admiral Gilmour was reported in Factiva as saying that the minimum distance for an offshore LNG terminal ought to be about 10 miles. Castle Point does not have the luxury of 10 miles, several kilometres or even one mile. The distance separating our homes, schools and workplaces from the Calor site is precisely 200 yd. Canvey faces significant additional risks from terrorism-it suffered a terrorist bomb attack in the 1980s. The site is also well below sea level, creating major flood risks and increasing existing ones.

My Bill would increase and formalise the protection afforded to communities and give clarity and certainty to applicants, the HSE and planning authorities, saving time, expense and much community anguish. If the Government listen, they will amend the Planning Bill to accommodate the sensible and necessary provisions in my Bill. As it stands, the Planning Bill will cause more difficulties; under it, the location of a dangerous plant will be decided by an unelected quango, the infrastructure planning commission. The IPC will operate behind closed doors, removing democratic legitimacy as well as involvement by local councils or even the Secretary of State.

The Planning Bill fails conspicuously to give the necessary procedural rigour for the IPC to deal with the location of hazardous sites. That causes great concern to the Campaign to Protect Rural England and other excellent environmental organisations seeking, like me, to defend the public interest. I commend my Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill ordered to be brought in by Bob Spink, Mr. Peter Lilley, Dan Rogerson, Patrick Mercer, Mr. Christopher Chope, Mr. Dai Davies, Dr. Evan Harris, Mr. Andrew Love, Mr. David Gauke, James Duddridge and Mr. James Clappison.

Bob Spink accordingly presented a Bill to require the introduction of binding guidance regarding minimum distances between developments classified as Control of Major Accident Hazard sites and other specified types of building; and for connected purposes: And the same was read the First time; and ordered to be read a Second time on Friday 6 June, and to be printed [Bill 55].