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Titan America (Carolinac Cement) has turned down a \$200,000 state grant to upgrade a rail line to its proposed site after state officials informed the company that such public funds might trigger a State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) review of the project. SEPA requires a full review of all environmental impacts before the state issues any permits for the proposed facility.

This is the third time in recent months that Titan, a multi-national cement conglomerate based in Athens, Greece, has modified its plans to build the fourth largest cement plant in the U.S. along the Northeast Cape Fear River near Wilmington, NC. Each change removed conditions that would likely force a SEPA review. The first modification was made last fall when Titan changed the boundaries of their proposed limestone mine to avoid destruction of 600 acres of coastal wetlands that federal and state agencies described as "Aquatic Resources of National Importance." Titan has also removed barge equipment from its project. The use of a barge to transport materials between the plant and the port would require upgrades to the old Ideal Cement dock that could also trigger the state environmental review.

Titan spokesperson Kate McClain told the Wilmington Star-News that SEPA played no role in the decision to turn down the rail grant, but rather the company could not meet a two-year construction deadline. Titan was awarded the grant in May 2008, but had yet to receive the funds.

Publicly, Titan has maintained they are not trying to circumvent any regulations or environmental reviews. However, emails obtained by the Star News and reported in a December 20, 2008 article contradict Titan's public statements. According to the Star News article, Marino Papazoglou, Titan's director of business development, said Titan officials are eager to avoid a prolonged review of the air permit because "we do not know what, if any, new regulations may be established by the new administration(s)."

The move comes one week after a federal judge revoked Titan's mining permit for their Pensucco mine near Miami, due to concerns over health and environmental impacts of the mine. This is the third time Titan's Pensucco mining permit has been revoked in a long-running lawsuit that was brought after the carcinogen benzene was found in a nearby Dade County wellfield, which provides drinking water to much of Miami.

Thousands of citizens have contacted legislators and officials at the Division of Air Quality asking that Titan's air permit be delayed until the cumulative impacts of the cement plant and mining operation are known. Joining the chorus of concerned citizens are legislators Carolyn Justice (R-NC) and Senator Julia Boseman (D-NC), the North Carolina Marine Fisheries Commission, Southern Environmental Law Center, Duke Environmental Law & Policy Clinic, North Carolina Coastal Federation, Cape Fear Riverwatch, PenderWatch & Conservancy and Friends of the Lower Cape Fear/ StopTitan.org.

Despite growing opposition to the proposed cement plant, the Division of Air Quality is expected to issue Titan's draft air permit soon—spurring nearly a thousand letters to legislators calling for an immediate moratorium on new cement plants in North Carolina until adequate regulations are in place and all impacts are known.