

Not in my back yard; Some County residents concerned at having an ethanol plant nearby

By Craig Spychalla - Daily Register

Cambria resident Janelle Zacho has seen firsthand what an ethanol plant can produce.

It's not a fuel, however.

It can create a divided community with farmers on one side and village residents on the other - former friends and neighbors who may never speak to each other again.

When Didion Milling proposed bringing an ethanol plant to Cambria in 2002, lines of division formed early on. Many expressed environmental concerns about locating a plant in this small village of 800 residents.

"I think they tried to convince people it was a safe, hazard-free plant," Zacho said, adding that people were concerned about the smell, noise, water issue and the plant's proximity to the school.

"The farmers wanted it hands-down. It divided the community in half," she said.

State Rep. Eugene Hahn, R-Cambria, who owns a farm near the village, said he's dumbfounded by people's opposition to ethanol plants.

Although ethanol plants are subsidized by the government, Hahn says it is a small amount compared to government expenditures for oil.

"I get e-mails saying (ethanol plants) cannot stand on their own two feet," he said of government subsidies for plants. "They don't realize how much we have to spend on the military to protect oil interests."

Ethanol plant investors tout that ethanol is good for the environment because it can reduce carbon monoxide emissions in vehicles by as much as 30 percent. And it helps lower gas prices and reliance on foreign oil.

But some residents say an ethanol plant will hurt the environment.

Opponents of ethanol often point to the smell generated from a facility, and they cite Gopher State Ethanol in St. Paul, Minn., as evidence. That plant, located in a residential area, was forced to close in 2004 after years of complaints. Ace Ethanol of Stanley in northern Wisconsin also reached a settlement with the state to pay \$300,000 for violating air pollutant emissions, which it later fixed.

Hahn said he has traveled to the ethanol plant in Monroe in the summer and winter and didn't detect a strong odor coming from the plant.

At least one Monroe resident has filed a lawsuit against Badger State, claiming the air quality in the community has deteriorated since the plant was built.

In 2003, Cambria voted down the Didion proposal during a referendum, but there is still division in the community.

"A few farmers said they are through coming into Cambria," Hahn said, adding that this past year there was a Christmas parade that was a step in the right direction to bring people in this community back together.

"It's a first move to try and mend the fence," he said.

A plant near Friesland

While Didion was struggling to get village approval for an ethanol plant, the United Wisconsin Grain Producers, just a few miles down the road, did not meet as much resistance.

However, some county residents are concerned with the proximity of the plant, which starts production April 21.

"Some neighbors are for it, some are against it," said Norman Werner, who lives near the plant.

Werner, who was part of a group that tried to stop the plant from coming to Friesland, also fought against the Didion plant in Cambria. He said his biggest concern is the amount of water the plant will pump out of the ground for production.

"One thing I think you're going to see in six months to a year, I think you're going to see water problems," he said.

Werner is concerned that the two high-capacity wells the plant operates will hurt private wells like his.

UWGP wells will pump 307 gallons per minute (442,080 gallons per day) to operate the facility, for which it received a permit from the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources for.

The amount of water pumped out of the ground by UWGP was tested only against the closest municipal well - which is in Friesland.

"We do not consider private wells," said George Michelson, water supply engineer for the DNR. "If you live across the street and your well dries up, you have to go to court."

Michelson said, however, that the test considers the ethanol pumps operating at maximum capacity for 24 hours for 30 days, which he said most likely will not be the case.

Didion was turned down for its permit because of the amount of water requested, Michelson said.

Kevin Roche, president of UWGP, said wells going dry near an ethanol plant hasn't occurred at any other plant he knows of.

But water is not the only concern for residents. Werner said he is also worried about air pollution.

"The reason they are building it out in the country is the pollution they generate," he said.

Roche said there is a limited odor that will come from the plant. "You would have to get within a few feet of the plant to notice it."

In Minnesota, 14 ethanol plants were required to install pollution upgrades which include a thermal oxidizer - a device that has been in UWGP's plan from the beginning when it proposed the Arlington site. It controls air pollution ethanol plants create, eliminating up to 99 percent of volatile organic compounds.

The battle is not over

While the Didion ethanol plant proposal divided a community, Zacho said that didn't happen as much in Friesland. She said it's a tight-knit community where most people know someone who farms.

"When they said (ethanol) is a good thing for farmers, they sat back and said, OK," Zacho said.

While the Friesland plant is the first to start up in Columbia County, Zacho thinks Didion is waiting for another go at ethanol.

If everything goes well with the UWGP plant, Zacho said people may think it's not so bad and Didion may slide in with another proposal.

On Tuesday, Zacho won a seat on the Village Board and said if Didion proposes an ethanol plant again, she will vote against it.

But Hahn said state ethanol plants are doing well, and it would be nice one day if investors could get their money back they put into projects.

"It took 30 years but we've finally got a plant in Columbia County," Hahn said.

"I think we are blessed that the plant in Friesland is coming online."

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