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**Ethanol plant smell upsetting**

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George Hesselberg

Jun. 8--Neighbors of a giant ethanol plant near Jefferson are gagging from odors from a lagoon, and they have been holding their breaths waiting for a company solution.

One resident, Janet Bartz, was specific in her complaint: "Along with the horrendous stench, which is causing residents to experience breathing problems, severe headaches and inability to sleep, there is also loud noise which can easily drown out a normal conversation in your backyard. "

Renew Energy, owned by Jefferson Grain Processors, took over the former malt plant for conversion to ethanol production two years ago, and opened it in October as the state 's largest ethanol plant. Renew has apologized for the bad smell and at first promised a quick resolution to the problem, according to Bartz. But that was weeks ago, she said, and the only noticeable result is a notice of a meeting with the company set for Monday at 6:30 p.m. at the Comfort Suites in Johnson Creek.

Coincidentally, the Department of Natural Resources has scheduled a meeting Wednesday at 1:30 p.m. in the Jefferson County Courthouse to hear comments on the company 's application for modification of its air pollution control and operating systems.

Local DNR Warden Dave Walz said the two issues are unrelated, and that the DNR is responding separately to complaints about the odor from people who live along Highway 26, near the plant.

"It smells a lot like septage, " he said.

He said complaints have been coming in for at least three weeks.

The five lagoons on the 400-plus acre property were used legally by the previous malting plant to dump wastewater.

Walz has referred the complaints to DNR experts, and a Renew spokesman said the company is working with the DNR to solve the problem, but there is no short-term solution.

"There are five lagoons, and the smell is coming from the first three, " said Walz.

"Just driving by, I would say it smells like septage, septic sewer. I had one of the callers say it smelled like hair perm, and another described it as a combination of septage and something else. "

'The smell is bad'

Robert Welch, a company spokesman, said the company 's executive officer, Jeff White, will explain the smell and the solution to it at the meeting Monday.

"The smell is bad, horrible, it smells like a paper mill, only a real intense version, " said Welch.

Noting that the smell does not result from any illegal emissions or "anything untoward, " he explained, "the lagoon needs to get mature. "

The plant, said Welch, released some tank leftovers, "corn meal, sort of, " into a lagoon.

"The lagoon, like a septic tank, needs to mature, and the bugs in there now are not the most efficient bugs. So these inefficient bugs are in the process of digesting the corn meal, and they create the smell. Once the bugs mature, this won 't happen. "

"In the meantime, we are taking active steps to get rid of the smell, " he said. And they are not working "as well as we had hoped. "

"I wish I could give you a time line for how long, but that got us into trouble to begin with, " he said, referring to the company 's initial promise to residents that the smell would be taken care of quickly.

The company will add chemicals to the lagoon to cause a reaction that will break down the contents without making a smell, he said.

"We had no idea this would happen. We thought the lagoon would be mature enough, " he said.

Apology issued

"What it is, is if you threw a handful of corn meal in a bird bath, it would soon smell like this, " he said.

White apologized to residents in a followup letter distributed last week, and explained the smell is "caused by corn waste in our lagoons being consumed by micro-organisms in the lagoon water ... unfortunately, this job is quite smelly. " He said the organisms work faster on warmer days, which also causes more odor. Wind conditions also contribute to the smell staying around.

Dave Carper, a compliance engineer for the DNR 's air management program, said the company 's response has been "aggressive, " and includes aerating the lagoons and also treating the lagoons with hydrogen peroxide to speed up the process.

The waste from the plant normally would be discharged, legally, into the Rock River, said Carper, and that process has continued. If the levels of effluent exceed DNR standards, however, that waste is channelled to the lagoons.

"My experience is that these facilities by and large do not create a lot of odor problems, but these lagoons are problematic, " he said.

Discharging the corn waste into three of the lagoons also stirred up the sediment, he said.

A short-term problem

"This is a short-term problem and we are working with the facility, " Carper said. "The facility is responding in an aggressive manner to deal with the problem. "

Will the odor return if the lagoons are used again?

"Good question, " said Carper.

"They have three out of five lagoons they have used that are creating odor problems. (Those are the largest, with a 50-million-gallon capacity.) The other two have very little water and very little sediment in them. We are stressing that they need to have plans to make sure if they end up as storage, they do it in a way they don 't create those (odor) problems.

Carper said DNR wastewater management experts are also keeping tabs on the solution process.

Bartz was not impressed. She pointed to the malodorous history of the now-closed Gopher Ethanol Plant in St. Paul, a converted brewery that was closed in 2004 after years of unresolved smell and health complaints.

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