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Local

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Posted on Thu, Feb. 05, 2004

ST. PAUL: Ethanol plant will get more testing

BY ROBERT INGRASSIA
Pioneer Press

Minnesota regulators said Wednesday they have acquiesced to West Seventh Street neighborhood demands and will do some rigorous emissions studies of the Gopher State Ethanol plant.

But in a case of "be careful of what you wish for," the new studies will extend the state's review of the St. Paul plant for a new operating permit. During the process, the plant will continue to operate. Some area residents were looking to the permitting process to force Gopher State to either shut down or accept more stringent pollution-control standards.

At a turbulent neighborhood meeting in December, some residents lambasted state officials for making decisions about Gopher State without knowing how much pollution the plant was emitting.

"The No. 1 thing they were saying is, 'Get more data before you proceed. That's what we're doing,'" said Dave Beil, a permit engineer for the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency.

Beil said the agency has asked its contractors to develop air tests that can detect more toxins at lower levels. Previous tests at the plant failed to identify some expected pollutants because the equipment and methods were not sensitive enough, he said.

Developing a new testing scheme could take months, Beil said. Conducting the tests and analyzing the results could take months, too. All that means delays in the permitting process.

State officials had originally intended to publish a draft of a new Gopher State permit sometime early this year. Issuance of the draft is important because residents and other interested parties then can make comments and request a hearing before a judge and the agency's board.

"What I have a problem with is that they're talking about months," said John Birrenbach, a West Seventh resident who has been fighting the plant for years. "It's another delaying tactic."

Janette Brimmer, legal director for the Minnesota Center for Environmental Advocacy, called the state's decision to conduct more emission tests at the plant a mixed blessing.

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"If the neighborhood knew there was going to be a delay, they might not have asked for more testing," said Brimmer, whose organization has worked with West Seventh residents. "You want the additional data, but I have a problem with the plant continuing to operate under the old permit."

Gopher State, operating in the former Schmidt Brewery at 882 W. Seventh St., has been a source of neighborhood ire since it began turning corn into ethanol in 2000. The company's state permit expired last year, but the plant is allowed to keep operating while the pollution-control agency considers its renewal application.

Gopher State Chief Executive Officer Jim Freeman said the company remains confident that its operation will meet the conditions for a new permit.

"We look forward to the opportunity to get this testing done," he said. "This isn't news to us. We understand it."

West Seventh residents, who complain about the plant's sickly-sour odor and its toxic emissions, have been fighting Gopher State on several fronts. A battle over odor raged at the local level last year, with the city accusing the company in a Ramsey Court civil trial of being a public nuisance. The firm ultimately agreed in a court-supervised deal to submit to odor tests and to take steps to reduce the stench if the plant failed to meet certain standards by May.

Gopher State exceeded several of the odor limits during the first round of testing last fall. A hearing in front of Ramsey County District Judge Dale Lindman is set for Feb. 12. City attorneys and Gopher State will be allowed to address any points of contention about the odor agreement.

Robert Ingrassia can be reached at ringrassia@pioneerpress.com or 651-292-1892.

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