

Royal Oak to close its Ocala plant

Plant to shut down in face of inquiry, resident complaints

CHRISTOPHER CURRY
STAR-BANNER

OCALA - Royal Oak Enterprises announced Thursday it will close its Ocala charcoal plant by the end of February.

The announcement came with the Georgia-based company under investigation by the Department of Environmental Protection for possible permit violations, and under heat from neighboring residents and the Ocala officials concerned about pollution from the plant.

"This is fundamentally a good thing for residents around the Royal Oak facility," said City Councilman Kyle Kay. "I am happy for them. It's a new day and they won't have to deal with the environmental concerns of Royal Oak.

"It emphasizes the need for these industrial facilities to be located in an area that does not have a negative impact on the residents of Ocala and Marion County," Kay said. "It is unfortunate that the employees will lose their jobs. But with the low unemployment rate we have now, it is a good time to be looking for a job."

In a press release, Royal Oak said the decision to close the plant, at 1921 N.W. 17th Place, after 30 years of operation was due to higher operating costs and "environmental issues" caused by poor quality of the raw materials - wood waste - the plant used in the production of charcoal.

Sally Scofield, a spokeswoman at Royal Oak's Roswell, Ga., home office, would not offer any details beyond the three paragraph press release. Royal Oak President James Allen could not be reached for comment. The plant, which has 43 employees, is scheduled to close by Feb. 28, according to the press release.

"We are happy the neighbors will not have to deal with the environmental nuisance anymore," said Ruth Reed, president of Neighborhood Citizens of Northwest Ocala.

"We are sorry for the 43 people who work there," Reed said. "We had tried to sit down at the table with Royal Oak to reach some sort of solution. It seems to me they took the easy way out and decided not to try and work things out with the neighbors."

For years, nearby residents had soot from the plant raining down on their houses, sometimes coating their vehicles and infiltrating their homes and air-conditioning units. They voiced concerns that Royal Oak and other nearby industrial sites were producing pollution that might cause respiratory and other health problems.

The latest round of concerns about pollution and possible health problems at Royal Oak started when Reed's community organization and Wild Law, a nonprofit organization focused on environmental protection, lobbied the Ocala City Council to try to clean up the plant's operations.

City Council started a letter-writing campaign to the DEP and state and federal elected officials to monitor the plant more closely. Within days, DEP conducted a field inspection that found nine potential violations, including that the plant was emitting a hazardous amount of the pollutant methanol and not reporting it in permit applications.

"For any facility, including Royal Oak, we need accurate information on a permit," said Jeff Prather, a spokesman at the DEP Orlando office. "Their permit indicated they were not emitting methanol. It's not that they wouldn't be allowed to emit methanol. It's just that it wasn't in their permit."

Prather said this was the first time he could recall a plant closing in the midst of an ongoing investigation into possible violations. He said Royal Oak's comment in its closing announcement about the poor quality of wood waste as a raw material in charcoal production could refer to the high amount of water and sand in Florida's wood supply, which does lead to higher production costs and pollution emissions.

Jeanne Zokovitch, an attorney with Wild Law, said northwest Ocala residents will remain active in battling pollution from industrial sites near their homes.

"That (Royal Oak) has been the predominant source of emissions in the neighborhood, but not the only source . . . and definitely there will be a concern with whatever follows Royal Oak to that site," she said.