

Soot sleuths

Volunteers monitor industrial plant emissions

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STAR-BANNER

OCALA - For decades, residents in a northwest Ocala neighborhood feared their concerns about pollution from nearby industrial sites too often fell on deaf ears.

So they recently decided to track the pollution themselves with old-fashioned observation skills and by using household items like paper plates and bed sheets to mimic more expensive, sophisticated equipment to gather evidence on the emissions and particles that the Royal Oak charcoal plant and other industrial sites near their homes spouted into the air. Late last month, they launched the Northwest Ocala Bucket Brigade, a local link in a national chain of neighborhood organizations formed to monitor pollution.

At the same time, a high school student from the other side of town launched a grass-roots pollution monitoring campaign of her own in northwest Ocala. For a biology class science project, Forest High School sophomore Ollie McLean mounted pieces of white poster board coated with Vaseline at five homes within a quarter mile of Royal Oak to catch airborne particulates for one week. She also put similar monitoring stations at five locations in her southeast Ocala neighborhood, at least two miles from Royal Oak.

Ollie said the results were no surprise. Soot covered the boards from northwest Ocala in black while those placed in the southeast area of the city remained almost pristine white. She said the ratio of particulate matter collected on the boards near Royal Oak to those in southeast Ocala was 116 to 1.

"This is just a young girl's project, but there is no doubt," Ollie's mother, Martie McLean said. "There's no denying it."

Meanwhile, the local bucket brigade that the Neighborhood Citizens of Northwest Ocala started with help from nonprofit environmental group WildLaw continues to collect data. On pollution, residents detail the smoke and other visible emissions from Royal Oak and other nearby sites and the soot and other particulates raining down on their homes. The group also is monitoring from the nearby Pine Oaks golf course and Lillian Bryant Park.

The plan is to send the collected particulates for testing through the National Bucket Brigade Coalition. Residents also are detailing any respiratory or other ills they are experiencing.

Royal Oak has announced plans to close its Ocala plant at the end of February, but Jeanne Zokovitch, an attorney with WildLaw, said that has not affected the Northwest Ocala Bucket Brigade.

"This was all planned before Royal Oak announced its departure," Zokovitch said. "But announcing a departure and actually departing are two different things. And sometimes emissions can get worse before a facility closes because they feel they have nothing to lose, not that there is evidence that is happening here.

And Royal Oak has never been the only facility the community was concerned about."

Zokovitch said the idea is for residents to have hard evidence to back up their decades of complaints about pollution in the area.

"It is community involvement, so everyone is on patrol," said Ruth Reed, president of the Neighborhood Citizens of Northwest Ocala. "I think it's effective. This is our way of letting them

know the whole community is watching, to let them know they must stay in compliance until the close Feb. 28."

Zokovitch said a group of California residents launched the the first bucket brigade, using a five-gallon bucket, a hose and a Teflon bag to monitor pollution in their community. Anyone seeking information on the Northwest Ocala Bucket Brigade may e-mail Ruth Reed at lreed904514@mfi.net or Jeanne Zokovitch at wildlawaces@comcast.net.