

## Pollution risks?

### Agency finds what could be violations at Royal Oaks charcoal plant in Ocala

CHRISTOPHER CURRY  
THE STAR-BANNER

Ocala - For decades, residents of a northwest Ocala neighborhood have feared possible air pollution as the soot drifted toward their homes from the nearby Royal Oak charcoal plant.

Now, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection says a September field inspection of Royal Oak found nine "possible violations of law," including failure to report emissions of the hazardous air pollutant methanol on permit applications to the DEP.

"Some of those things probably won't end up as violations after we receive more information," said Jeff Prather, a spokesman at the DEP Orlando office. "But there will need to be some corrective action out there for them to be in compliance. When it is all said and done, I don't expect them to get a clean bill of health. I do expect there to be some violations."

James Allen, president of Roswell, Ga.-based Royal Oak, would not comment on the warning from DEP, except to say that "we don't feel like we're in violation."

"It's not really an appropriate time for me to discuss this," Allen said, adding Royal Oak staff was meeting with DEP to try to resolve the situation.

The DEP found that Royal Oak reported to the federal Environmental Protection Agency that its charcoal production in Ocala produced 93 to 97 tons of methanol, or methyl alcohol, each year. But in its permit applications to DEP, Royal Oak stated its Ocala plant was not a major source of air pollutants, although 10 tons per year of methanol was the threshold for being a major source of pollution.

Methanol is a neurotoxin that may cause headache, vomiting, irritation of the nose and throat, and bronchitis if inhaled, according to [www.scorecard.org](http://www.scorecard.org), an Internet site operated by Environmental Defense, a New York-based environmental protection organization. In very severe cases, methanol exposure may cause convulsions or death, according to the Environmental Defense information.

The DEP also found that the amount of charcoal produced according to Royal Oak's annual production log did not match that in reports submitted to the state. Also, a visual check on Sept. 14 showed excessive levels of emissions, according to DEP.

The warning has not affected operations at the Ocala plant, 1921 N.W. 17th Place. Tuesday afternoon, the plant was running with a flame burning above its emissions stack.

A few months back, Betty Ann Smith moved into a concrete block home almost in the shadow of Royal Oak. She said since then thick clouds of smoke in the air and soot showering down on her van have been a frequent part of life.

"Sometimes it's terrible. Sometimes it's good," Smith said. "Today is a good day."

The DEP's Sept. 14 field inspection came shortly after the Neighborhood Citizens of Northwest Ocala, a community organization, urged the Ocala City Council to again try to do something about possible air pollution from the plant. City officials started a letter-writing campaign to state and federal regulatory agencies, state legislators and congressional delegates to monitor the plant more closely.

"Right now it is going in the right direction, but where it will end up no one knows," said Ruth Reed, president of the Neighborhood Citizens of Northwest Ocala. "I know what we've been through and we don't want to continue like this. We need a solution.

"Whether they (Royal Oak) go away or whether they stay it has to be worked out for the neighbors, our health concerns, our livelihood, and having to live there. We can't open our windows unless it rains. You pray for it to rain."

In 1996, the city administration paid the DEP to conduct six months of air monitoring tests of Royal Oak and concluded there was no health risk from the plant.

"We've been on their backs so I'm glad they (DEP) are paying more attention," said City Councilwoman Mary Sue Rich.

Rich said she believes Royal Oak needed to prove compliance with air pollution laws and standards or lose its permit.