

Pollution concerns Royal Oak neighbors

Charcoal plant has ceased production, Northwest Ocala citizens group says.

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THE STAR-BANNER

OCALA — The leader of a Northwest Ocala citizens group says the Royal Oak charcoal plant in Ocala apparently has ceased manufacturing with the announced closing of the facility at month's end.

But the concerns of Ruth Reed, president of Neighborhood Citizens of Northwest Ocala, and other neighbors over air pollution from the charcoal plant and other nearby industrial sites will continue into March and beyond.

Their northwest Ocala residents group and the nonprofit environmental protection groups WildLaw and Global Community Monitor say a crude, low-cost pollution test known as a "wipe sample" hit on 20 chemicals known as polynuclear aromatic hydrocarbons, including several linked to cancer.

"We were alarmed by it," Reed said of the test results.

Jeanne Zokovitch, an attorney with WildLaw, acknowledged that more advanced testing would be needed to show the levels of the chemical present and whether they pose a health risk for neighbors.

The wipe samples were collected in late January by using gauze to wipe six days' accumulation of soot from the hood of a car parked at Reed's home, two blocks from Royal Oak. The gauze then was placed in a vial and shipped in a cooler for testing at Columbia Analytical Services, a laboratory in Kelso, Wash., certified by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Wilma Subra, a Louisiana chemist who has served on several EPA boards for pollution issues, reviewed the results Monday. She said seven of the chemicals found were on the EPA's list of probable human carcinogens.

"It's a definite cause for concern," Subra said. "It indicates the need to do additional testing to determine the extent of this airborne contamination."

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection agreed to do particulate monitoring of the emissions from Royal Oak, 1921 N.W. 17th Place, with the city of Ocala providing free electricity and security fencing for the equipment.

But legal issues have delayed those tests. City Attorney Pat Gilligan said his office objected to a provision in a contract that DEP submitted requiring the city hold DEP legally harmless for any potential accidents involving DEP equipment. Gilligan believed that provision violated previous Florida attorney general's opinions.

In an e-mail, DEP spokesman Jeff Prather said the regulatory agency would meet with Royal Oak representatives next week to discuss the plant's closure and a pending consent order in connection with permit violations at the Ocala plant discovered on a site inspection last year.

Prather said DEP would like to look at the laboratory results from the wipe sample and said there were other sources for the types of chemicals found, including gasoline and diesel exhaust.

The Star-Banner attempted to reach Royal Oak staff for this report. Phone messages left at the Ocala plant and with company President James Allen in Roswell, Ga., were not returned.