

Landfill company under fire across panhandle

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Coyote C&D Debris Disposal Facility in Freeport is not the only Coyote landfill to come under scrutiny.

Last August, Santa Rosa County residents filed suit against Coyote over its landfill in Navarre. Residents claim they have experienced health problems associated with contaminated air and water near the site.

Joint Department of Environmental Protection and Coyote testing of the landfill's monitoring wells showed elevated levels of benzene, which can cause anemia and cancer. These levels were found in some local residents' personal wells, in one case reaching 21 times the allowable limit.

Residents also noticed a smell of rotten eggs, believed to be hydrogen sulfide.

An informal survey conducted by the residents and examined by the county's health department showed those living close to Coyote's Navarre landfill suffered from respiratory problems.

The problems began with a fire on the landfill, said Howard Jones, who lives about one mile from the landfill and is part of the lawsuit against Coyote.

He has suffered from headaches and nausea, and said another resident, Robert Grant, would duct tape the seams around his doors and windows to keep the smell away. Grant has since moved to get away from the area.

The closer people lived to the landfill, the worse their reported symptoms.

"It's a huge quality of life issue," said Bill Sirmans, environmental health director for the Santa Rosa County Health Department.

The smell is believed to come from decomposing drywall, but the high benzene levels near Coyote's Navarre landfill may have come from items it is not supposed to take, Sirmans said.

Kathleen DeVore-Jones, health administrator for the county's health department, said there is no doubt the problems come from the landfill.

She said debris taken by the landfill during the 2005 hurricane season might have included items it does not normally accept.

"Maybe it could be avoided upfront if what went into the landfill was watched closely," she said.

Water quality monitoring in Navarre is ongoing, said Jones, and air quality testing is expected to begin shortly to confirm the cause of the smell.

A similar smell is now coming from Coyote C&D in Freeport, according to local residents.

Coyote purchased the Freeport landfill from GRW Inc. in 1995. The company's current permit began in January 2001 and continued through January 2006.

Testing of Coyote landfill detection wells in 1999 and 2000 showed lead concentration as high as four times the primary drinking water standard set by the Environmental Protection Agency, according to the water quality report compiled by Gallet & Associates.

Benzene levels were double the primary standards on one occasion, while iron, sulfate and total dissolved solids all tested above the secondary standards.

The high levels of lead and iron correlated with high levels of turbidity. Turbidity is a measure of the cloudiness of water and can cause increased levels of some metals.

The testing procedure, however, can sometimes cause turbidity and therefore artificially inflate contaminant levels. Gallet & Associates recommended continued monitoring, but nothing further.

Adults drinking lead contaminated water can suffer from high blood pressure and kidney problems. In children, lead can slow mental and physical development.

Phone calls to Coyote were not returned.

To determine water quality coming from the landfills, monitoring wells located both above and below the ground level of the site are tested for contaminant levels. These results are compared to federally set maximums as well as to each other.

A higher concentration of contaminants in the lower wells indicate a possible source of the contamination is the landfill.