

Coyote Landfill draws fire

Residents complaining about smells, illness they say the dump site caused

William Rabb

Residents living near a Holley-Navarre landfill, concerned about foul smells in the area, are seeking action to ensure the dump is regulated properly.

Neighbors say they have received little satisfaction despite repeated complaints about Coyote Landfill, a construction-debris repository off Five Forks Road near Holley.

Part of the 37-acre landfill caught fire last October and burned for almost two weeks before the fire was extinguished. Since then, dozens of residents have reported continuing odors resembling the sulfurous aroma of rotten eggs. Several also have complained of respiratory problems, headaches and other health concerns.

The landfill's manager said that smells from Coyote are minor, and that at least three other debris pits and now-closed municipal landfills in the vicinity may be responsible for the strongest odors. A March fire that was blamed on Coyote actually came from a brush pit next door, said John Warren, manager of the landfill, which is owned by Trinity Investments of Fort Walton Beach.

"On rare occasions, there might be some small odors from our landfill, but they're not of any magnitude, and there certainly are no odors affecting the health of anyone," Warren said.

The complaints, which were virtually nonexistent before hurricane debris began filling up area landfills, now go well beyond odors. Residents point out that the Florida Department of Environmental Protection has found problems at and near the landfill but has taken no significant action:

- Groundwater contamination. In January, the DEP notified the landfill that groundwater sampling from monitoring wells on the property found poisonous arsenic and benzene, an industrial solvent also found in gasoline, at levels well above the allowable limit.

The department ordered the landfill to continue monitoring the situation and to conduct an assessment of where the chemicals may have come from. That assessment was due in May, but the company received an extension of the deadline until September, DEP spokeswoman Sally Cooley said.

In April, the DEP also found a cancer-causing chemical in the well water of a nearby homeowner. Benzene was detected at levels 20 times the allowable amount on Robert Grant's property, a quarter-mile from the landfill.

But because Grant had switched to receive water from the Holley-Navarre Water System, the DEP advised Grant there was little the agency could do, department documents show.

"The DEP basically said, 'Don't worry about it,' " Grant said.

- Smoke, fire and odors. Last November, the DEP fined the landfill \$4,000 after the fire broke out for not having sufficient staff to cover debris with dirt and for allowing the fire to start.

The landfill company's owner said the firm spent more than \$200,000 extinguishing the fire last fall. Coyote tries diligently to meet all regulations and run a clean operation, company president Todd Sweizer wrote to the DEP.

Residents are particularly frustrated with the DEP because the landfill's December 2004 permit prohibits any "objectionable odor" that "unreasonably interferes with the comfortable use and enjoyment of life or property, or which creates a nuisance."

Neighbors say the odor easily meets that criteria, yet state environmental regulators have failed to act.

"It makes it unfit to live up there near it," Grant said.

After months of frustration, the group of residents is getting some attention.

The Santa Rosa Health Department will use a \$20,000 federal grant to determine the extent of residents' health problems and find ways to improve them. But several neighbors believe that effort could take months, and they wonder what action, if any, will result.

County action sought

Some residents now believe they may have to go before the Santa Rosa County Commission and request a local ordinance, just as Escambia County residents did earlier this year.

After the Saufley Field landfill in West Pensacola smoldered for months, residents protested.

In March, the Escambia County Commission passed an ordinance that allows authorities to shut down a landfill if fire and odor problems are not rectified. Santa Rosa commissioners should consider similar action, Navarre residents said.

So far, the Navarre residents said they have only talked with Santa Rosa Commissioner Gordon Goodin, who resides in Navarre.

"They're meeting the letter of the law, as far as I know," said Goodin, whose own sand-mining operation is less than a mile from the Coyote Landfill. A Santa Rosa County road crew headquarters also is located on the edge of the pit.

"The smell is a problem, though. My guys have to smell it every morning," Goodin said.

Goodin has donated money to the group to help find a solution, but he said he's unsure what action the county can take.

Commissioner Don Salter said the troubles with Coyote Landfill should be a wake-up call to county officials: The county should prepare for future growth -- and more demand for landfills -- by setting aside rural land far from residential neighborhoods in the northern part of the county.

Legal changes ahead?

Part of the Navarre residents' frustration may have as much to do with the law as it does with state and local enforcement efforts.

For example, state and federal regulations do not require construction debris landfills to be lined with an impermeable membrane, which would help prevent contaminants from leaching into the groundwater, the DEP's Cooley said.

Also, construction landfills can accept pressure-treated lumber. Significant amounts of arsenic have been used in treated lumber since the 1940s to prevent rot and termite damage. In 2004, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency banned arsenic in treated wood, but newer treated wood still contains heavy metals, including copper and chromium.

Coyote's manager said that much of what the landfill accepts appears to be damaged structures made from treated lumber.

A number of studies have shown that treated lumber in unlined landfills may contribute to water and air pollution. A 2000 report by the U.S. Geological Survey estimated that treated lumber in landfills could leach arsenic for at least 70 years before the wood is broken down completely.

Because of the growing concern nationwide, some states, including Minnesota, have banned treated lumber waste from unlined landfills. Florida has not.

But that may change. State and federal regulators now are considering new rules that would prohibit unlined pits from accepting treated lumber, Coyote's Warren said.

"It's just a matter of time before it's required nationwide," he said.