

Editorial: Area landfill problems being discovered too late

The attention being paid to the Coyote Landfill in the Holley-Navarre area is gratifying. But what's needed is better control over landfills across the Pensacola Bay Area so we don't face these problems in the future.

Problems at the Coyote Landfill and the Saufley Landfill in west Escambia County have led both counties to look more closely at what they can do to prevent them.

The Florida Department of Environmental Protection needs to evaluate its role, as well.

Landfill problems are insidious. Too often, by the time a problem becomes obvious, it is extremely difficult to do anything about it. If pollutants are flowing out of a landfill, or leaching into the groundwater below, fixing it takes more than just turning a spigot.

Meanwhile, it seems clear that DEP needs to be more aggressive, and needs more authority for dealing with landfills. DEP too often seems limited to talking instead of acting, until the problem becomes acute.

DEP's enforcement authority seems vague, with "consent orders" taking precedence over enforcement. Obtaining a consent order requires negotiating with a polluter, which might be a workable process in some cases.

But with landfill pollution, talking too often leads to a worse problem.

DEP reported last month that groundwater contamination at the Coyote Landfill exceeds permitted standards, and that it was conducting an assessment. But the results won't be ready until next month.

"It will tell us the extent of the groundwater contamination," a DEP spokeswoman said. "Then we will have to determine what they need to do."

DEP and the county should also determine how the problem was allowed to develop until overwhelming complaints from residents in the area brought it to light.

According to a door-to-door survey by the Santa Rosa County Health Department, more than 100 people living near the landfill have complained about a variety of ailments.

"The ones who live within a quarter-mile have more issues, and the ones who live over a mile have fewer issues," said Kathleen DeVore-Jones, administrator for the Health Department. "The closer they lived, the more complaints of symptoms, such as burning eyes, nausea and breathing problems."

Those complaints came on the heels of fires at the construction and debris landfill in October and November.

Fires also brought neighborhood complaints about the Saufley Landfill, which was shut down earlier this month.

Also this month, Escambia County Circuit Judge Terry Terrell ordered owners of the Saufley Landfill to stop taking waste and to reduce the height of their debris mound. DEP officials said other problems remain.

All this action is good. But if local and state governments were properly monitoring landfills, shouldn't these problems have been caught before neighbors had to raise a loud and collective cry of complaint?