

Burning landfill provided an out

by Paul E. Kostyu

COLUMBUS, Ohio - The Ohio Environmental Protection Agency recommended Wednesday that a landfill said to be on fire be denied a license to operate, but provided an out to keep it in business.

In a letter to William Franks, Stark County's health commissioner, Ohio EPA Director Chris Korleski said the Countywide Recycling and Disposal Facility "is not in substantial compliance with Ohio's environmental laws."

The health board is expected to read the letter Thursday at a meeting, but not take any action on it.

Korleski told Franks, "I do not make this recommendation lightly, because ... the entire facility," not just the landfill's problematic 88 acres, "would be shut down."

But Countywide, which south of Canton, will not be shutting down any time soon, if ever.

Korleski said closing the facility will not solve its problems. To bring it into compliance with the law, he suggested seven minimum orders.

Will Flower, a Florida-based spokesman for Republic Services which owns Countywide, said the landfill has been "aggressively addressing" issues and there is no need to shut the facility.

"We've added gas collection wells; we've added landfill flares," he said. "We capped large portions of the site. We added an odor neutralizing system. All those things worked. We probably did more than what was required."

A California landfill fire expert told the Ohio EPA Friday that two fires are burning inside Countywide. And Korleski said in an interview the fires and odor are underlying problems that have to be solved before the landfill can be in compliance.

"These odors have bothered people far too long," he said.

Flower said, "I'm perplexed as to the director's recommendation in light of our operation history. Our environmental compliance history is very pristine. You need to recognize that the day-to-day operation is what the license is all about. Our responsibility is to be environmentally sound and to manage society's waste properly. We're not going to shirk either responsibility. We will do whatever is necessary to be in compliance."

The landfill accepts 6,000 tons of waste per day.

If the Stark County Health Board denies the operating permit, Republic Services can appeal to Franks, the state's Environmental Review Appeals Commission (ERAC) and the courts.

Korleski said he read all the "maybe 200 e-mails" from proponents and opponents of shutting down Countywide and talked to local officials and state legislators.

"I spent most of the time last week on this issue," said Korleski, who visited the landfill on his second day on the job as EPA director.

Korleski's recommendation did not suggest a time frame for Countywide to complete changes. "We will insert a tight deadline," he said. "We don't want to wait six months for proposals. It will be more like 30 to 45 days."

State lawmakers whose constituents are affected by Countywide generally expressed satisfaction with the EPA's action.

"I'm surprised they've gone this far," said State Rep. John Hagan, R-Alliance. "(The EPA) takes this serious, which is great and it will force faster, positive action."

Hagan, however, doesn't want the landfill shut down. "In the real world," he said, "we continue to need landfills and need them to operate properly and protect citizens."

Hagan, whose district includes Countywide, said he is working on legislation to "tighten the rules and laws" affecting solid waste landfills. They have not been updated since 1986, he said.

"I think finally we have an answer from the Ohio EPA," said State Sen. Jason Wilson, D-Bridgeport. "The homeowners and residents of Stark and Tuscarawas counties can be assured that the EPA is fighting for them."

State Sen. Kirk Schuring, R-Canton, said, "I think (the EPA) came to the right decision through analysis of the situation and an understanding of the magnitude of the problem."

In a Jan. 25 letter to Korleski, Schuring requested the landfill's operating permit be delayed, suspended or denied until problems are corrected.

"I'm very happy with the recommendation to not renew at this time," said State Rep. Allan R. Sayre, D-Dover. "It's refreshing to have a director who is truly out for the best interest of the people."

State Sen. John Boccieri, D-New Middletown, said Countywide has to be forced into compliance, though that doesn't mean the landfill should be shut down permanently. He said it's important the Ohio EPA regulate such nuisances instead of putting the burden of proof on citizens.

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