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## Homer looking into coal mine's water request

Sun, 07/29/2012 - 8:00am | Tracy Moss, staff writer, *The News-Gazette*

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HOMER — Tom and Sue Smith are the sixth generation to work the family farm adjacent to the Salt Fork River, a natural resource that they worry could be harmed by a large withdrawal of water for the proposed Sunrise coal mine or by discharge into the river from the site.

"I would hate to see large quantities of water taken from the river," said Sue Smith, who is one of the residents in Champaign and Vermilion counties who have been coordinating their efforts against the proposed mine, along with the Prairie Rivers Network, which advocates for clean water and healthy rivers, and the grass-roots group, Stand Up to Coal.

Opponents have several concerns, fearing that coal dust could affect air quality, the mining process could damage tiles and farmland, and large water withdrawals from the area and water discharge back into the environment could affect the quantity and quality of local groundwater and the Salt Fork River.

Sunrise officials maintain that their industry is highly regulated, and their operations are not allowed, by those regulations, to hurt water quality or quantity, and safeguards are in place to ensure that.

Sunrise Coal, based in Terre Haute, Ind., formally presented to the Homer Village Board on July 9 its request for water and sewer services, and the village is considering the request.

The Salt Fork is one of multiple water sources that Homer will consider tapping to meet Sunrise Coal's request for 325,000 gallons of water a day initially, and 540,000 gallons a day in later years. The underground mining area would mostly be in Vermilion County, but some will stretch into Champaign County with the surface operation on 400 acres southeast of Homer and north of Sidell.

Homer Mayor David Lucas said it will likely be a four- to six-month process for the village to determine whether it can meet the Sunrise water request.



Photo by: Vanda Bidwell/The News-Gazette  
 Homer Mayor Dave Lucas at the Homer water treatment plant.



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"The question we are trying to answer is, can we supply this amount of water without jeopardizing our current (water) supply, because we don't want to put the village at risk for shortages of water, and we do not want to put the village at risk for any financial burden," he said. "Currently, there is absolutely no water shortage in the village of Homer. We have more than an adequate supply for our water needs, which is why we are even thinking about this request, because we do have adequate supply."

Sunrise has asked for 2,000-4,000 gallons per day of treated water, which Lucas said is about what Heritage Junior High uses. That's in addition to the 325,000 gallons a day of untreated water that Sunrise has requested for the first three to five years and anticipates increasing to 540,000 gallons a day after that.

Much of the water is used to wash the coal, and some is piped underground to control coal dust in the mine, according to Suzanne Jaworowski with Sunrise Coal.

Right now, she said, the request for Homer water is the company's primary approach for meeting its outside water needs.

"But if it (Homer request) does not work, we do have other options as backup," said Jaworowski, who would not disclose details of backup plans.

The mine also would have a collection pond on site, she said, that would gather rain water, and a system that would allow tiles from local farm ground to drain onto the coal mine site, providing another water source. She said the pond would be the primary source, and when its level is lower, the mine would rely more on water from Homer.

Jaworowski said she did not want to comment on whether the mine could exceed the 540,000 gallons a day from Homer, but that amount is what the firm anticipates as the "high side" of its water needs.

First, Lucas said, the village will review the village's water supply and how much might be needed to supplement that and the most economical way to do that. He said the village likely will request additional research and investigation by outside sources, including engineering firms, the Illinois State Water Survey and others. He said there could even be additional drilling and test wells.

Lucas said the village's average daily water use is 120,000 gallons. Its water comes from five underground wells in sand and gravel deposits. The three original wells are on the west side of Homer and are rated at 120,000 gallons a day maximum. More than 15 years ago, the village went in search of a supplemental water supply, and in 1996-97, established the wells to the north, 2 miles west of Ogden and about a mile south of U.S. 150.

Lucas said the village does not know the capacity of the two northern wells, but they produce more than the wells west of town. Lucas said the village runs the wells on a rotating basis, with one to the west always running with one north of town.

He said investigating the capacity of the source of the northern wells will likely be one of the water committee's recommendations, possibly hiring an outside entity to determine the capacity of that aquifer.

"Until we do that, we really don't have a good handle on the exact capacity," he said.

Lucas said the village is strictly looking at this as a water sale to another industry.

"And the industry could be anything, the agriculture industry. It could be a water bottling company. To us, it's a water customer, and we are looking to fill a request to another water customer," he said.

Lucas said he's thankful for the opportunity to try to fill this request, because this is the best economic opportunity Homer has had in years.

"Things like this don't come along every day for a small village. It could mean an enormous amount of revenue for this small village," he said.

Lucas said the village will look at all the water sources available in the area and investigate everything, including the 120,000 gallons a day that will be exiting the village's sewer treatment plant as well as the water flowing down the Salt Fork River. He said village officials have also discussed getting water from companies such as Illinois American Water. The nearest connection point to such water would be in Sidney, he said, but that would take a 6-mile water line. Lucas said the challenge to the village will be providing water at the lowest cost per gallon and lowest infrastructure cost. He said it's unclear at this point whether pulling water from the Salt Fork would be economical.

"It needs research. We have several options of drawing water from the Salt Fork. Some are

good, some are not, and I already believe that some are not feasible. There are things that need to be researched, and it may come down to it not being worth it," he said.

Smith said she and others question whether the village of Homer can legally tap into the Salt Fork to sell that water to a private entity.

Lucas believes the Salt Fork has enough flow to afford a large withdrawal. He said 20 million gallons a day are released into the Saline Branch of the Salt Fork from the sewer plant in northeast Urbana. That water originates from the Mahomet Aquifer, he said, and that's "bonus water" that's not part of the river watershed. It's an opportunity to reuse that water, Lucas said.

Smith said taking large amounts of water from the Salt Fork will certainly change the river system, the water supply and could affect biological processes, including mussel reproduction, and that concerns her. Also, she said, there are concerns for those downstream, including Oakwood, which pulls its drinking water from the Salt Fork.

Oakwood Mayor Bob Jennings said the village has concerns about water quantity, but mostly quality.

"We have followed up with those concerns, and we are relatively comfortable with the situation," said Jennings, who visited Sunrise's Carlisle, Ind., mine, which pulls the majority of its water supply from underground wells associated with the Wabash River. Jennings said Sunrise officials answered many of their questions on that visit.

But, Jennings said, village officials will be keeping their eyes and ears open.

"And I personally plan, as the permit process goes through, to attend those hearings and participate where necessary and make sure there are safeguards," he said.

Jaworowski said Sunrise has submitted its application for its mining permit to the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, and it's in a preliminary phase as state officials review the 1,600-page application to ensure the required information has been provided. Once the department declares the application complete, hearings will follow, giving the public the opportunity to comment on the company's mining plans.

Opponents of the mine have been meeting regularly to inform the public of their concerns and coordinate their efforts, which include a recently released video, "Questions for Sunrise Coal," a petition drive and fundraising for a possible legal challenge.

The village of Homer's water committee will hold its initial meeting to discuss the Sunrise water request at 7 p.m. Monday, July 30 at the Homer village hall, 500 E. Second St.

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**STM** wrote on July 30, 2012 at 8:07 am

#1

Coal companies have proven themselves to be poor neighbors time and time again. Their safety records are horrible because their own people run the government agencies who regulate them. They're terrible stewards of the environment (OUR

environment). Any coal mined in this area is high-sulfur, low-grade stuff. Now we want to let them deplete rivers and aquifers so they can do more damage?

Coal is a 19th century energy source. There are better options available. My advice to the citizens of Homer is to tell Sunrise to get lost.

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naturallypatty wrote on July 30, 2012 at 9:07 am

#2

I totally agree with STM.

Coal companies have notoriously been bad neighbors.

The time to stop this project is now. Once a coal company gets into a community, it is too late to protect ourselves. The IEPA and IDNR regulations are not enough to protect us from these mines, their environmental records show it all quite clearly.

The regulators do not have the power to shut down offenders in a time frame that protects the people. I like having water in my rivers, clean air to breathe, and do not want coal slurry to be stored anywhere near me.

Keep that coal (and its carbon) sequestered where it is... leave it, and me alone!

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