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State to investigate new complaints over Murdock mine site

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MURDOCK — State environmental regulators agreed Monday to look into new complaints by Murdock area residents that a large amount of dust still blows on windy days from the former Murdock coal mine site, which is the target of pollution complaints filed last fall by the Illinois attorney general's office.

At a meeting Monday afternoon in Murdock, local resident Jim Ingram told officials with the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency and the Illinois Department of Natural Resources that white dust was blowing from the Murdock mine site just last week. He said it was thick enough that he thought workers at the former coal mining site near the small town of Murdock in Douglas County were burning something that was emitting white smoke. The dust complaints were confirmed by some of the dozen other Murdock area residents at Monday's meeting in the Murdock Community Center.

Gary Harris, who lives in Murdock, said he also saw the dust that looked like white smoke last week, but the horrible odor that forced him to keep his windows closed at times last year has no longer been a problem.

Monday's meeting between local residents and state officials was spearheaded by state Sen. Chapin Rose, R-Mahomet, who has been working with Murdock-area residents since odor and dust complaints and environmental issues surfaced at the former mine site in the last few years.



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Photo by: Tracy Moss/The News-Gazette
Scott Fowler, center, with the Illinois Department of Natural Resources, and Bill Buscher, right, with the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, show residents aerial photos of the Murdock mine site during a meeting in Murdock Monday. The photos, taken years apart, show progress that's been made toward reclaiming the former coal mining site.

Rose arranged the meeting so state officials could update local residents on their regulatory efforts and the legal case, involving Alpena Vision Resources, a private Michigan-based limited liability company that took over reclamation of the former Murdock coal mine several years ago.

Residents also learned at Monday's meeting that Alpena's state mining permit is coming up for renewal, and officials with the Prairie Rivers Network have requested a public hearing on that renewal. That public hearing will be held at 6 p.m. Monday at the Little Hall on the Prairie on Second Street in Murdock.

Last fall, the attorney general's office filed a complaint with the Illinois Pollution Control Board alleging water and air pollution by Alpena at the Murdock mine site.

As part of its reclamation efforts, Alpena had been accepting various materials as fill and cover, including lime sludge from the Decatur and Danville water-treatment plants; sludge from the Urbana Champaign Sanitary District; and gypsum, a lactic-acid byproduct, from Archer Daniels Midland Co., in addition to other types of materials, like fly ash. Alpena has a federal permit to discharge acid-mine drainage from the mine site into a tributary of the Brushy Fork, and according to the complaint, Alpena stockpiled and stored delivered materials in ways that created a water pollution hazard, and also allowed the emission of dust and unpleasant odors through storage, handling, disposal and use of wastes.

Chris Presnall, attorney with IEPA, told the residents that the hauling of biosolids — like sludge from the Urbana Champaign Sanitary District — was halted. He said Alpena still has a permit to bring in that type of material, but the state has no intention of allowing the company to do that again. And the legal case, he said, is progressing, which means Alpena officials are in discussions with state officials about reaching a settlement.

"We are hoping to settle, but if they don't agree to our terms, then we will litigate it," said Presnall, who explained that the goal is not just pursuing fines and penalties against Alpena but getting the Murdock site successfully reclaimed. He said the state doesn't want to suck the company dry of its financial resources so that it doesn't have the ability to finish the reclamation. "We are focused on cleanup."

Presnall said samples of surface water discharged from the site have been in compliance, and Scott Fowler with IDNR told residents that quarterly sampling from Alpena's only groundwater monitoring well to the southwest corner of the site, which is the down gradient point, have all been in compliance as well. He said the samples have actually shown good quality groundwater there. But Fowler told residents that the state will test the wells of any concerned residents within a certain proximity of the mine.

Fowler also told residents that he would look into the dust complaints. He said the ash and gypsum material that's still being hauled in is damp when it arrives, but if it's allowed to sit too long, it will dry out. Fowler and other state officials said the wind was probably kicking up the material as workers were pushing it around on the site.

Fowler said Alpena is making progress toward reclamation and showed residents aerial photographs of some areas that have been filled in and are now overgrown with vegetation.

But he explained that although Alpena is not mining coal, it still needs the mining permit,

because it has a marketable material on the site, the leftover fine coal refuse. In the past, Fowler said, the very fine coal refuse leftover in the mining process was waste, but now, new uses are emerging for the material.

He said Archer Daniels Midland in Decatur has use for the material but is reluctant to take it in large quantities. Fowler said Alpena officials are marketing it to a utility in southern Illinois and hope to begin hauling it out this summer. He said that refuse must be out of there to fully reclaim the site.

Rose encouraged residents to continue informing state officials of what they experience around the mine site and encouraged IEPA officials, who are responsible for the environmental regulation of the site, to communicate with Fowler and other officials with IDNR, which is the agency that issues the permits. Rose said there is a disconnect between the two agencies that needs to be addressed. Rose asked about a timeline for a resolution of the legal case and reclamation at the site.

Presnall said it's difficult to estimate when the legal process will conclude, but he hopes there's a resolution within a year. He said between the attorney general's complaint at the IEPA issuing violations, they now have the attention of Alpena officials, who now have a Springfield attorney who is representing the company and actively negotiating with state officials. In regard to reclamation, Fowler said there's no time limitations for that process.

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