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As odors from Bridgeton Landfill fire intensify, so does concern

By JEFFREY TOMICH AND CYNTHIA BILLHARTZ GREGORIAN

http://www.stltoday.com/news/local/metro/as-odors-from-bridgeton-landfill-fire-intensify-so-does-concern/article_59bf89b3-5541-5f39-87e8-1fc2a9076dd2.html

For more than two years, a fire has smoldered deep within the Bridgeton Landfill, releasing a pungent odor that has nearby residents reeling and keeping them confined inside their homes.

And almost as rotten as the odor, they say, is a lack of information about the air they're breathing.

Even on Wednesday afternoon, with the temperature in the low 30s and a brisk wind, the smell was a constant assault on Thomas Allen's senses.

"It's just too much to bear," said Allen, 80, who only a few years ago spent $5,000 for a porch on his mobile home.

Now, after continuing complaints, the company that owns the landfill said it's taking new steps to contain and suppress the fire — actions the company and regulators hope will quell pungent odors.

"We didn't anticipate the odors would persist as long as they have and this many people would be impacted," said Susan David, a spokeswoman for Republic Services Inc. in Phoenix.

David said temperatures beneath the surface at the landfill have reached 170 degrees, sometimes more than 200 degrees. The heat is caused by faster-than-normal decomposition of waste that is buried there.

Republic Services plans to have a website available as soon as today to help answer residents' questions and provide a way to contact the company. The Department of Natural Resources, the state agency responsible for overseeing the site, updated its website with information on the landfill this week.

But Kathleen Logan Smith, executive director of the Missouri Coalition for the Environment, said the unwillingness to more directly address questions and concerns was troubling.

A contractor hired by Republic Services did air sampling at the site in August, according to the DNR. The state even approved the sampling plan and observed the testing.

“Although some landfill emissions have resulted in and may result in a perceptible odor, there were no compounds at concentrations of health concern to members of the surrounding community or to the people working on the landfill,” the contractor’s report said.

The department also asked Republic Services to conduct additional air tests, DNR spokeswoman Renee Bungart said.

But Smith said that the state should be testing air quality in the area routinely and that residents exposed to the putrid smell should not be expected to rely solely on five-month-old data from a company that is responsible for it.

“The people need to have someone looking out for them — someone that’s not Republic,” she said. “There needs to be someone out there on the people’s side.”

The St. Louis County Department of Health has been briefed on activity to mitigate the smell. But the department lacks the ability to do air monitoring itself, said Craig LeFebvre. The county is, however, drafting a letter requesting the DNR to conduct additional air monitoring, he said.

Chris Whitley, a spokesman for the Environmental Protection Agency’s regional office in Kansas City, Kan., said that the agency was aware of issues at the landfill but that the state had regulatory authority for the site.

Whitley said the subsurface fire was 1,200 feet from an area of the adjacent West Lake landfill where Cold War-era radioactive waste is buried.

Steps being taken by the company include the installation of dozens more wells to extract landfill gas and reduce odors, and the addition of a “wall” of gas wells to contain the spread of the fire.

David said the work was expected to be complete in about six weeks, depending on weather. However, there’s no guarantee the odor will subside.

Republic Services also recently repaired a leachate collection line that broke on Jan. 14 and contributed to a spike in odor from the facility, according to the DNR’s website. And Republic has also begun taking several older leachate-collection wells out of service, which is likewise expected to lead to some periodic increases in odors.

And the St. Louis Metropolitan Sewer District notified Republic Services on Jan. 10 that discharge from the landfill sent to a sewage treatment plant contained excess effluent, MSD spokesman Lance Lecomb said.

According to the DNR, Republic began shipping some of the leachate to an off-system waste facility. But those shipments, too, exceeded the limit for benzene.

Smith said high levels of benzene in the landfill leachate raised additional questions about the type of waste buried at the landfill.

Larry Waulters, 74, of Bridgeton, wonders, too. He can't see the landfill from his mobile home just north of the Interstate 70-270 interchange, but the stench is a constant reminder it's there.

"If there's not a wind, it settles right in this area," Waulters said "It smells like a trash can. A big, monstrous trash can."

The 52-acre Bridgeton Landfill was permitted in 1985 and stopped accepting waste in 2004. It is split into two areas known as the North and South quarries.

Problems at the landfill began in December 2010 with the reporting of elevated temperatures at some gas extraction wells. Tests the following month discovered higher-than-normal concentrations of hydrogen and carbon monoxide and reduced methane, which are an indication of a subsurface fire.

In April 2012, representatives with the DNR's solid waste program contracted with landfill fire technical experts to confirm what was happening at Bridgeton. And the department issued a notice of violation to Republic Services in July for violating a section of the law that prohibits the storage or disposal of solid waste in a manner that creates a public nuisance or adversely affects public health.