

From the Front ▶

EPD: Regulators give info on GRP permits



State regulators talked with commissioners and answered citizens' questions Monday about permits for the Georgia Renewable Power plant near Carnesville.

Two notices of violation were sent to GRP on Dec. 9.

Commissioner Jason Macomson asked Truszczynski if the EPD provides continuous monitoring of the water during the violation process.

She said that the EPD does not do continuous monitoring.

Truszczynski pointed to the monitoring requirements already in place for GRP and any wastewater or stormwater. She said GRP co-mingled waste and stormwater, so the plant has an industrial water permit.

"There are monitoring requirements for that," said Truszczynski. "We monitor for the standard of metals, total suspended solids, looking for oil and grease, as well as a number of different, volatile organic compounds, including things like phenols: things we might expect to see around creosote products."

Commissioner Eddie Wester asked if GRP was supposed to be doing their own monitoring at this time.

Truszczynski responded that GRP is supposed to be monitoring what is in their own facility.

"We have end-of-pipe limits for them for what leaves their site and enters our waterbodies so they are doing monitoring and providing that to us on a monthly basis," said Truszczynski.

Macomson asked how the EPD will monitor and assess groundwater contamination in local bodies of water, such as Indian Creek.

Truszczynski stated that the EPD does not generally do groundwater monitoring of that kind and that GRP would not be doing that either.

"We have certain types of permits that do require some groundwater monitoring wells, but this is not one of those permit types, so there is no groundwater monitoring being done around the site," said Truszczynski.

Bridges asked for an update on the findings and the cause of the recent fish kill in Indian Creek, as well as a timeline for when the sand and other debris flushed into the creek would be cleaned up.

Truszczynski said she did not have answers for that, but would be happy to follow up with the Department of Natural Resources (DNR).

Wester asked if GRP will be required to continue monitoring their water after the initial clean up.

Truszczynski stated that the end-of-pipe wastewater permit requirement is on a five-year renewal cycle.

At that time, the EPD will look at the data submitted by GRP, as well as any updated federal requirements and assess whether or not those permit limits are still the most appropriate ones.

The permit cycle for GRP will expire in September.

During the permit renewal process, the EPD has to receive the application for renewal within 180 days prior to renewal.

There is also a public comment period during the permit renewal process.

Notice of the public comment period will be posted on the EPD website and GRP is required

to post a notice at the Carnesville Courthouse. Truszczynski said she expected the public comment period to begin in late spring.

Truszczynski was asked if the EPD is testing local watershed and private wells for baseline data and for evidence of contamination of runoff waters from the plant.

"GRP has storm water retention ponds that its runoff empties into and they must monitor this discharge per the requirements of their permit," Truszczynski said. "The EPD does not monitor private water. We only monitor what goes into the state waterways."

Citizens who are interested in having their wells tested were encouraged to get them done through the University of Georgia Extension Service.

Raymond Fitzpatrick, the Franklin County Extension agent, was present at the meeting and said he has been approached by several citizens concerned about their wells and desiring to have them tested.

"I'm here tonight to hear what the EPD tests for so I can know what to tell them," Fitzpatrick said. "Each test looks different so I need to know what to tell them they need to test for."

Truszczynski told Fitzpatrick that if he emailed her, she would get him the information he needed.

What the tests need to be testing for will determine their cost.

Wester added that local agriculture uses public creeks for their livestock and crops. Truszczynski said that while EPD monitors surface waters, nothing is tied directly to agricultural water use.

Truszczynski was asked who oversees GRP's monitoring of water since GRP is required to provide monthly reports to the EPD.

Some of the testing is done by GRP in-house and some of the testing must be sent out to a third party company.

Truszczynski was also asked if GRP can discharge water onto private property.

"GRP is required to monitor water at the end pipe point of discharge into state waters," Truszczynski said. "All other discharges are outside of EPD's jurisdiction. If water is flowing off of GRP property onto an adjacent property, this can be regulated by local nuisance ordinances."

When asked if GRP's permit renewal could be refused, Truszczynski said the renewal recommendation would be made based in part by public comment and other information related to monitor-

ing.

Next, Dika Kuoh and Pierre Sanon of the EPD Air Protection Branch addressed the commissioners and answered questions.

Kuoh told the commissioners that the GRP plant is currently operating on an initial permit during the start up phase.

Once the plant reaches full operation, it must obtain a final permit, which is a federal permit and must be applied for within 12 months of the plant beginning operation.

GRP has until June for the application for the final federal permit.

If they fail to meet this deadline, it will result in enforcement and fines and consent orders being levied against them by EPD.

This process will also include a public comment period for 30 days.

"Comments from the public can be submitted online, by email, regular mail and by telephone," Kuoh said. "A public hearing can also be requested. However, due to the amount of concern there is, we will most likely go ahead and plan a public hearing."

Macomson asked if the public hearing would be held in Franklin County or Atlanta because he said a lot of citizens would be interested in voicing their concerns.

Kuoh said the public hearing could be held in Franklin County and the EPD has employees who will reach out to the county to locate the best location for the hearing.

Kuoh and Sanon both said they have received a lot of complaints about both GRP plants, Franklin and Madison.

"We have been receiving a lot of complaint about odors coming from the plants," Sanon said. "This is due to all of the start ups and shut downs the plants have been experiencing."

Sanon said both plants have been experiencing an unusually high number of equipment related issues.

"The Madison plant is about two to three weeks older than the Franklin plant, which is why there are more complaints and more issues with that plant," Sanon said. "They have learned from what went wrong in Madison and made some corrections in Franklin."

Even though corrections were made, GRP Franklin has experienced 70-80 start ups and shut downs.

According to Sanon, the plants should only experience three to four start ups and shut downs per year for normal maintenance once normal operations have been reached.

"The sounds and smells are associated with these repeated start ups and shut downs," Sanon said. "Certain control equipment that regulates the output from the plants has to be offline during start ups and shut downs. The equipment only functions when the plant reaches normal operation."

Sanon said the equipment has to be off during these times for safety reasons.

Since the control equipment has to be off during start ups and shut downs, there is very little regulation occurring during those time periods.

GRP has informed the EPD that it expects to be fully operational by the end of this month.

"As of Dec. 14, Georgia Power began purchasing electricity that was produced by GRP," Sanon said. "It is in their best interest to be operational as soon as possible so they can produce and sell electricity to the grid."

When Macomson asked about the county doing its own testing and monitoring, the commissioners were informed that if they discovered any issues, they could report it to the EPD for a follow up.

Kuoh informed the commissioners that a Toxic Assessment (TIA) was conducted to test for ambient levels of pollutants, which is stricter than what the federal government requires, and both plants passed.

After passing the initial TIA, GRP has to conduct quarterly and annual tests. One was conducted in November.

GRP has 60 days to submit the results to the EPD that gives a third party company time to conduct tests and report the findings.

Kuoh said there are only a few companies who can perform these

tests and they have all been verified by the EPD.

Kuoh also said that the EPD has limited GRP to burning 20 percent railroad ties yearly when the federal requirement is 40 percent yearly.

"The fuel is weighted and adjusted for the percentage of railroad ties compared to raw wood chips," Sanon explained. "GRP has to keep detailed records for review. It's not in their best interest to overload on railroad ties because it would damage their equipment. Also, the wood chips burn better."

When asked how GRP was able to obtain a permit to burn creosote without the public's knowledge, Kuoh said it's because creosote is categorically exempt from and not considered hazardous waste by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), which is a federal agency.

The change in classification came in 2018.

The only way the EPD could prevent GRP from burning creosote is if a state law was passed.

"While we do have our own rules, they fall in line with the federal guidelines," Kuoh said. "We are like police officers. We don't make the laws. We just enforce them."

Kuoh and Sanon admitted that the EPD cannot regulate the sound produced by the plants, however, they have been pressing them on the issue due to the number of complaints.

Silencers were supposed to have been installed when the plants were built, but they weren't.

GRP has told the EPD it would take them six weeks to get them installed as of Dec. 4.

Kuoh, Sanon and Truszczynski also gave the following answers to questions asked of them:

- once the plant reaches a steady state of operation, the burning of the nose and bad taste in the mouth that citizens are experiencing due to the emissions should be minimized. The citizen who asked the question said the burning smells had continued during the plant's continual, steady operation;

- ash from the plant will go to a silo onsite where water is added then it is sold to a third party company for shipment and disposal offsite;

- Truszczynski was unable to say what type of lining was present under the woodpiles to keep water from soaking into the groundwater, but said she would try to find the answer;

- the EPD is still in the process of penalizing GRP for the fish kills in Indian Creek. GRP has been issued a notice of violation. Truszczynski said the EPD hopes to have the investigation resolved within a few months;

- Kuoh said it is illegal for citizens to burn railroad ties in their yard and Sanon added that the reason GRP is being allowed to do so has to do with the boiler it uses;

- Truszczynski, Kuoh and Sanon did not have an answer for if the steam coming off of storage vats containing ammonia on the rear side of the plant were responsible for stinging eyes reported by people living on that side of the plant.

The representatives said the EPD wants citizens to notify them with any problems, concerns or issues they are aware of.

They also said they would provide telephone numbers, websites and email addresses to the county for citizens to use to contact the EPD with complaints and concerns.

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