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Septic plan prompts worries

MIKE ARCHBOLD; The News Tribune

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The first commercial spraying of septic tank waste on forestland in Pierce County could begin before the end of this year, leaving behind roughly 6 million gallons a year of the partially treated domestic waste.

Neighbors who live near the site south of Carbonado aren't happy. They say the Carbon River canyon is too environmentally sensitive, and they want more discussion before permits are issued.

"This is not a remote forest land; it's our backyards," wrote Mardel Chowen of Carbonado in a letter to Pierce County Planning and Land Services department. "We don't want this here. We will fight in any way we can."

The proposal comes from Northwest Cascade Inc., parent company of Honey Bucket and Flohawks, a Puyallup-based septic tank cleaning company.

It plans to spray treated septic waste on 1,300 acres of White River School District land on the ridge above Highway 165 near Carbonado.

Called septage, the waste originates in septic tanks, cesspools and portable toilets.

At least four 6,000-gallon tanker trucks would haul the material five days a week using Forest Service and logging roads in the area, according to the proposal.

J.R. Inman, the general manager of Northwest Cascade's Flohawks Division, said septage is considered environmentally safe and an effective fertilizer for forestland.

White River school officials also don't see a problem. They say the idea of helping their trees grow faster is good and that payment of a penny per gallon of waste sprayed sounds like a good deal.

Northwest Cascade approached the school district and estimated annual payments of \$50,000 to \$60,000 a year.

"It's a natural kind of process," Deputy School Superintendent Roger Marlow said of the spraying.

He said the county Health Department and the state Department of Ecology wouldn't permit it if it was bad for the environment.

SPREADING CONTROVERSIAL

The application of biosolids on pastureland isn't new.

The City of Tacoma, for example, each year distributes about 4,000 tons of its EPA award-winning Tagro soil products from its wastewater treatment plan, and spreads it on about 350 acres of pasture in Pierce, Thurston and Kitsap counties.

This use of biosolids, however, can generate controversy. Some believe it is safe if done correctly; others claim too little is known about its effects on the environment.

Ellen Harrison, director of Cornell's University's Waste Management Institute, is concerned that there are no federal requirements for testing sewage waste for heavy metals and other pollutants.

"The problem we saw is not so much human health problems ... too much copper is a problems for plants," she said.

The better method of disposal is at treatment plants, Harrison said, but haulers don't like to pay the tipping fee.

The need to dispose of septic tank waste is not going away soon. There were 75,000 tanks in use in Pierce County homes, schools and buildings as of June 2006, serving more than a quarter of the county's residents. Each year nearly 60 percent of new county home permits include septic systems.

The waste is stabilized by bacteria over time inside septic tanks or by chemicals added inside portable toilets.

When Northwest Cascade gets it, the waste is screened for large materials. It can also be mixed with a liquid caustic lime to reduce odor and further break it down into compost.

The treated septage can be used in agriculture and forest areas, but unlike Tacoma's Tagro fertilizer, it is not suitable for home gardens.

Inman of Northwest Cascade's Flohawks Division said his company currently sends a high percentage of its septage to Biorecycling in Pacific, where it is mixed. After that, it is sprayed on pastureland in Mason and Lewis counties.

The rest of the company's septage goes to the Renton Metro sewage treatment plant in King County. The tipping fee is about 10 cents per pound, he said.

The reason for spraying it near Carbonado, he said, is to save money and keep Pierce County's waste at home.

The company spent the past two years researching spraying techniques and the effects of septage on forests at the University of Washington's experimental Pack Forest just outside Eatonville. The research will continue at the Carbon River site, Inman said.

He said every effort would be made to ensure the septage was applied safely and according to federal and state regulations.

'THE PUBLIC DOESN'T KNOW'

Carbonado resident Jill Cartwright, a member of Friends of the Carbon Canyon, said the canyon is too environmentally sensitive for spraying human waste. She lives on 18 acres at the south end of the proposed spray area.

Wildlife, mushroom hunters and hikers roam its ridges, she said. Rainwater flows from its flanks into the Carbon River and Gales Creek, which feed the Puyallup River.

The area is pockmarked with mine shafts. The town of Carbonado's watershed would be less than a half mile from one of the spray sites.

"The public doesn't know about this," Cartwright said, adding that neither she nor her neighbors were told about the project last summer when Northwest Cascade applied for permits.

She said she found a Pierce County Health Department public notice earlier this month stapled to a tree behind a locked Forest Service gate.

The company has passed one permitting hurdle: Pierce County planners say the spraying doesn't pose a significant hazard and that no environmental impact study is called for.

But the Friends of the Carbon Canyon group says one is needed and that it wants the county to allow more time to comment on the project.

The Town of Carbonado also weighed in with a letter expressing concerns about how the spraying might affect its water source.

The deadline for comment to county planners ended Friday.

STATE, COUNTY GATHER INFORMATION

Adonais Clark, a senior planner for the county, said he has received many letters expressing concern about the project. He

said they will be reviewed.

Clark said it's possible the county could ask for more information before passing on its recommendation to the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department.

The Health Department and the state Department of Ecology also are gathering information prior to issuing permits. The public has until Oct. 30 to send comments to the state.

David Bosch, a Pierce County Health environmental health specialist who is handling the permit application, said he hasn't visited the Carbon River site but plans to.

He pointed out that regulations govern the screening of septage, application rates, monitoring of spray sites, buffers separating septage from rivers and standing water, and use of the land after spraying. For instance, access is restricted for up to 30 days after application to a piece of land.

A 20,000-gallon tank erected at the site would hold the septage. Two 9,000-gallon tanks would be used to mix it with lime before spraying.

Inman said the company plans to spray about 200 acres a year, and it would be on relatively flat ground away from steep slopes, creeks and drainages.

"I'm a hunter and an outdoorsman," he said, adding that he wouldn't allow spraying that would hurt the environment.

He said Northwest Cascade would double the size of any setbacks required by the state.

"We don't want to harm any community," he said.

HOW TO COMMENT

What: Northwest Cascade Inc.'s septage spraying project in the Carbon River canyon area

Send comments to: Wyn Hoffman, Washington Department of Ecology, PO Box 47775, Olympia, WA 98504-7775, or David Bosch, Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department, Waste Management Division, 3629 S. D St., Tacoma, WA 98408-6897

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