

Quarry's emission reductions don't cut it -- pollutants haven't increased

Elliott Burr, Los Altos Town Crier, 7-7-10

Los Altos Hills resident Bill Almon, a vocal critic of the level of mercury emissions from the neighboring Lehigh Southwest Cement Permanente Plant, said he remains skeptical of quarry officials' claims to have found a solution that would reduce the cement's mercury content.

While the nearby facility's efforts to reduce its mercury emissions are "good," Almon said, he's not buying officials' figures.

"Any reduction of mercury is good. ... Any time they want to try something (to reduce mercury), even with a low payoff, should be encouraged," he said.

Almon, founder of watchdog group QuarryNo, responded to plant manager Henrik Wesseling's June 23 declaration of a 25 percent cut in mercury emissions and plans to comply with imminent U.S. Environmental Protection Agency regulations by 2013, saying officials weren't painting the entire picture.

"What they didn't mention is that last year's mercury output doubled over the previous year," he said. "So what you're left with is, if (mercury emissions) more than doubled, from what is a 25 percent reduction?"

Tim Matz, Lehigh director of environmental affairs, disputed Almon's claim, contending that the numbers reflect different mercury accounting methods. A letter sent to the Bay Area Air Quality Management District from Lehigh last August reported that the facility emitted 221 pounds of mercury per year in 2008. An addendum to the letter reveals that the plant actually released 582 pounds.

"It doesn't mean there's an increase over the past year," Matz said. "We just evaluated (the emissions) in a little more accurate a way ... assuming all the mercury input eventually leaves the system."

The letter – a Comprehensive Emissions Inventory Report – also revealed a reduction in benzene emissions, a carcinogen, from 21,300 pounds per year to 9,650 pounds using the more accurate accounting method.

Brian Bateman, director of engineering at the air district, said Lehigh is currently performing a refined study to determine the presence of any harmful emissions coming from the facility.

"We don't think they're over public notification thresholds, but this study will tell us for sure," said Bateman, adding he couldn't say exactly when the study would be complete.

Still, Almon maintains his reservations.

"The whole thing is a sham aided and abetted by the air quality district," he said. "When will there be real measurements of what the quarry and cement plant are emitting?"

The letter pinpointed a cancer score of 5.19 out of 10 for the facility's emissions, which takes into account the increase in mercury. The cancer score is "still below 10," reads the document, sent by environmental manager Scott Renfrew, "Thus no further health risk assessment is needed."

Lehigh officials said that up until now, the air quality district has declared that the quarry's mercury emissions don't pose any significant threat to health issues.