

Quarry plans emissions cuts

Elliott Burr, Los Altos Town Crier, 6-29-10

Cupertino's Lehigh Southwest Cement Permanente Plant, which borders Los Altos and Los Altos Hills, has drawn criticism from local residents and watchdog groups for its emissions and planned expansion.

But company officials said they have a solution that could reduce its cement's mercury content to comply with upcoming U.S. Environmental Protection Agency regulations by 2013.

Plant manager Henrik Wesseling said at a press conference June 23 that the company reduced the emissions by 25 percent, using a process that removes harmful limestone dust from materials in a solid state.

Because it is impossible to contain mercury in its vapor state, according to Wesseling, plant manager since 2008, "We needed to get it condensed and had to study it for (18 months)," he said.

Lehigh Director of Environmental Affairs Tim Matz couldn't say exactly how many mercury parts per million tons the plant emits today, because the number frequently fluctuates.

The company derived the 25 percent figure assuming "all mercury going in leaves the system out through the air," he said.

Still, according to Wesseling, the company is "excited" about current emissions reductions, even if they are not enough to comply with EPA regulations scheduled for release in August and requiring compliance by 2013.

The regulations could set a stringent limit of 43 pounds per million tons of feed – comprising calcium, iron, silica and alumina – that would require further reductions.

Wesseling said the Bay Area Air Quality Management District reported that the plant's mercury emissions "do not pose any significant (health) risk for the community" but said the company wanted to be proactive in reaching EPA goals.

Because EPA regulations would mandate reduced emissions, the company plans to implement an Activated Carbon Injection process to bind carbon molecules to mercury vapor and bring it into a solid state for containment, according to Wesseling.

"All cement plants are different," Wesseling said, noting that other facilities' mercury content varies.

The process "will be in a trial period," he said. "The company is committed to doing it before 2013."

Wesseling couldn't specify exactly when the plant would achieve 100 percent compliance with upcoming EPA regulations but said, "It will be in our foreseeable future."