

Lehigh Cement announces 90 percent reduction in mercury emissions

Matt Wilson, Bay Area News Group, 6-10-11

CUPERTINO -- Lehigh Southwest Cement Company announced last week that it has found a way to cut mercury emissions by as much as 90 percent. The announcement comes two years before new mercury emission standards by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency take effect.

The EPA standards set the nation's first limits on mercury emissions from existing cement plant kilns. The standards will limit American cement companies' mercury emissions to 55 pounds per 1 million tons of clinker.

Lehigh officials said it is the first cement plant in California and among the first in the nation to harness the new technology.

Nearly a year ago, Lehigh said it had installed equipment to reduce mercury emissions by 25 percent. The cement company's new system uses activated carbon injection, a method that traps mercury within cement rather than releasing it into the air.

The system takes mercury, a natural component of cement production, and binds it with limestone particles, essentially trapping the mercury inside the finished cement product. The system was tested and installed in late April.

The process allows the facility to comply with emission standards that are five times more stringent than current European emission limits for cement kilns.

"We take our responsibility to the community very seriously, and that's why this project has been my top priority since my first day on the job in 2008," Lehigh plant manager Henrik Wesseling said. "I'm proud of our 70-year history here in Cupertino, and we will continue to invest in our environmental performance at this facility."

Lehigh also announced it will install a continuous monitoring system in the fall so that emissions can be better analyzed in real time.

The announcement was made June 3 during an invite-only press conference at the Cypress Hotel. Santa Clara County District Supervisor Liz Kniss, Cupertino Mayor Gilbert Wong and Councilman Orrin Mahoney were among those in attendance. Councilman Barry Chang, who has been a consistent and boisterous critic of the cement facility, was not on the guest list.

The cement plant's operations have been an escalating concern for residents of Cupertino and neighboring cities, including Los Altos. The citizen group No Toxic Air filed a lawsuit in late May against the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors and Lehigh Cement. The lawsuit is asking to have a February decision by the supervisors thrown out.

The board's decision allows the quarry on the Lehigh site to continue mining on its 2,656 acres without the need for most county-issued use permits, as the cement facility and quarry's operations predate many county regulations.

Stuart Flashman, an Oakland-based attorney with a Harvard Ph.D. in biochemistry, is representing No Toxic Air in this action. The group was formed in January and includes Chang on the group's board of directors.