



PRESS-REGISTER

Mercury found in groundwater

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Staff Reporter

BREWTON -- Escambia County commissioners said Monday they were appalled to learn that mercury was detected over a four-year period in groundwater near a regional landfill in the county.

Ruth Harrell, a founding member of the Coalition for a Healthier Escambia County, told the commissioners Monday that ADEM data her group studied "shows that groundwater monitoring wells detected mercury in the water from about 1998 through 2003" at the Allied Waste Timberlands landfill.

"In 2002, the levels were five times the EPA standard for safe drinking water," she said.

In spite of that, Harrell said, the Alabama Department of Environmental Management never told county officials about the findings.

The Press-Register was unable to contact Allied Waste Timberlands officials. An ADEM spokesman said that the agency did not tell officials because no law required it and no imminent threat to human health was involved.

According to engineering reports filed with ADEM, landfill operators found mercury in gases emitted by the landfill.

Mercury is a heavy metal that occurs naturally in the environment, but high levels of the element and lower levels of some compounds containing mercury can cause severe health problems, including neurological damage.

To fix the problem, reports state, landfill operators placed a gas extraction system in the landfill and piped the gas to a flare, where it is burned. The flaring started in 2002, and mercury levels in the groundwater test well declined. Tests in 2003 and 2004 indicated that mercury levels came near, but did not exceed, EPA's safe limits.

"We are not sure you were informed about this," Harrell told the commissioners.

Escambia County Commission Chairman David Stokes said he was unaware of the mercury contamination before Harrell's report.

Harrell, who served as director of nursing for the Alabama Department of Public Health from 1987 to 1993, was selected by the Escambia County Health Care Authority in 1995 to lead the citizens coalition, which identifies health care needs.

"The question I have with the data we get from them or from ADEM is how dependable is the information when we get it?" Stokes said. "We depend on our state agencies to give us information. ... We want to know is this safe or is it not?"

Engineering reports submitted to ADEM in March 2002 show there is a tributary of Burnt Corn Creek some 1,200 feet from the monitoring well where mercury was detected. Some 13 households in the area get drinking water from private wells, one within a half mile of the well.

ADEM spokesman Scott Hughes confirmed the mercury contamination on Monday, saying the contaminant was found in one well "within the facility boundary."

ADEM did not notify the local government or the public because "specifically regarding groundwater there is no state solid waste regulation that requires notification of city or county governments," Hughes said.

"If there is any situation or scenario when we feel human health is in danger," Hughes said, "we are going to notify local authorities."

Once the contamination was discovered, Hughes said, the landfill operators put together a plan to address the problem.

Scientists say that mercury is not destroyed simply by burning. When burned, the mercury is dispersed through the environment.

Hughes said he was not sure if there were any risks from flaring the gases, but "I would think any system designed would not just transfer the mercury from water to air, but would address eliminating the mercury."

Federal officials "looked at the issue of mercury and determined that potential levels of mercury in gases were so minute" that flares were sufficient means of disposing of them, Hughes said.

The test wells are working, Hughes said, and there is "no evidence of migration" of the mercury to the outside area around the landfill.

Stokes and Commissioner Larry White said officials were also surprised earlier this year, when they learned that ADEM had approved the dumping of mercury-laden soil at the landfill.

The Press-Register reported in March that mercury-laced wastes at an Olin Corp. plant in McIntosh had been taken to Timberlands.

"We learned about it when it was published in the paper," White said. "We don't want to learn information like that from the newspaper. We need a communication line with ADEM."

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