

2005 July 22: WI Watertown: Tire fire requires environmental cleanup

Neighbors Near Tire Fire Blast State And County

'Where Were You 6 Months Ago?' They Ask As Blaze Is Still Burning

The Capital Times :: FRONT :: 1A

Friday, July 22, 2005

By Anita Weier The Capital Times

After half an hour, the acrid smell from the tire fire starts to bother you, and a small cough develops.

"We breathed that all night long," said Louise Genge, who lives near the still-burning Watertown Tire Recyclers facility. "You can't imagine our rage."

Thursday night they vented that rage on the Department of Natural Resources, as well as state and county health agencies, during a three-hour meeting in an all-purpose building on Jean Sage's property on Provimi Road, just down the road from the flames that were still burning after three days.

Close to 100 people showed up, most bringing their own folding chairs, as smoke rose in the air outside and firetrucks thundered down nearby roads, carrying loads of water.

Keith Buske was one of the angry neighbors.

"All the smart people show up afterwards," he said to the officials. "Everybody tries to cover their asses. Where were you six months ago?"

"I'm really glad to see that the DNR is here in force. Where were you when we begged you to look into this situation?" said Lois Schmidt. "Barb Palecek ... assured me everything was under control. This was in May. We got nothing from our county government or from you."

Others castigated health authorities for saying they did not have the resources to help protect them from the threat of West Nile disease from mosquitoes breeding in the tires.

DNR officials responded several times that they had done all they could with their authority, short of turning the matter over to the attorney general's office, which they were about to do.

But those present weren't just venting frustration about the fire; they were worried about what its effects would be on their health and their farm animals' health.

They wondered how they would pay for motels because they fear sleeping in a toxic cloud.

They worried about possible contamination of their wells.

And they very much wanted to know who would pay for the cleanup after the fire is finally out.

Joe Brusca of the DNR assured them that wells are being sampled and would continue to be sampled for years, and any that become contaminated would be replaced.

Jim Morrison of the state Division of Public Health said that the air is being sampled by state and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency officials.

So far, they have found nothing dangerous, the state officials said.

But Jody Langfeldt of the Dodge County Human Services and Health Department distributed fliers advising those with heart or lung diseases including asthma, older adults and active people should beware of the high level of soot in the air.

She suggested staying indoors, keeping windows and doors closed and using air conditioners to filter out fine particles. And she urged people to call a doctor if they experience chest pain, shortness of breath, coughing, wheezing and discomfort when taking a breath.

She also advised people to keep animals out of the path of the smoke and avoid sheltering animals in buildings because smoke might concentrate inside structures.

"We aren't overly concerned about ground water," Brusca said, because it flows in a direction where it won't cause harm. Moreover, most of the fire suppression materials have gone off the site and downstream, and some water is being recycled and reused.

People downstream on the Rock River also might note that the river is the "receiving stream."

Neighboring residents were skeptical, however, about the idea that 14 million gallons of water poured on the blaze by firefighters might not carry a few pollutants to their properties.

A chemical suppressant has been delivered and was to be applied to the fire Thursday night.

"After the fire departments leave," Brusca said, "we will monitor the facility to characterize the ash and the water and the waste materials and see what we can do with the disposal. The first thing we are going to do is sit down with (tire business owner) Tom Springer and tell him what to do and how to do it."

The fire is being investigated by state authorities, he added.

"We've had several teams out here investigating the facility. Internal investigators are looking at the files, looking at what happened here, both at the Department of Natural Resources level and the attorney general's office," Brusca said. "That enforcement action will be an ongoing investigation. Until the report is finalized I cannot comment on those reports."

There was no firm answer as to how a cleanup would be paid for.

"The Department of Natural Resources is not going to cover the cost of fire suppression. That is another state responsibility that the county and the fire departments are going to work out," Brusca said.

"We are going to classify this as a hazardous substance release. As far as the cost recovery, we are going to go after Mr. Springer."

He stressed that Springer will be responsible for cleaning up the site.

"If he can't or won't, we will look at alternative funds. We do have an environmental fund that can help pay for these kinds of responses, but the fund is thin. There is also the opportunity to have a special appropriation from the Legislature."

Springer does have insurance policies and a required \$150,000 bond is in place, according to Brusca.

Rep. Joel Kleefisch, R-Oconomowoc, who represents the area, said he would check into the situation with the environmental fund. However, he said the taxpayers should not be responsible for paying for a cleanup, but that Springer should.

He did promise one thing.

"I will work as hard as I can to make sure another permit is not issued" for a tire facility on the site, Kleefisch said.

E-mail: aweier@madison.com