

Anti-quarry group questions reliability of pump test results

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While the findings of pump tests conducted at the proposed St. Marys Flamborough quarry site won't be released until early September, opponents of the proposal are declaring the tests to be a dismal failure.

"There's no success measure for them," said Graham Flint, chairman of the citizen's anti-quarry group, FORCE (Friends of Rural Communities and the Environment). "They're not testing at the scale they aspired to and Mother Nature has conspired to make things even more difficult," he said, alluding to the record rainfalls that took place during the testing from July 21 to 29.

Flamborough councillor Margaret McCarthy also doubts that results of the test will be relevant given the excessive rainfall. "The test really would be rendered ineffective and a moot point based on the amount of water accumulation we have received," she argued. "I mean it certainly would not be indicative of normal conditions and wouldn't evaluate what a quarry would or would not do to an area," McCarthy concluded.

But a St. Marys spokesperson countered comments from Flint and McCarthy, noting that hydrogeologists conducting the tests were able to "stabilize" things despite the heavy rain and "get the results we were looking for."

Jennifer Tuck, manager of policy and planning for the cement company, explained that the first round of testing wasn't meant to test the Groundwater Recirculation System (GRS) equipment that company officials say will mitigate impacts on water quantity and quality if a quarry is approved for the corner of 11th Concession Road East and Milborough Line. She said the first round of tests focused on getting details about the aquifer in the area. The GRS will be tested in one of the two remaining rounds.

Flint noted that while the company's temporary Permit To Take Water (PTTW) for the tests allows St. Marys to draw 50 litres of water per second, they were only able to draw 10 to 15 litres per second. The reduced rate was also the result of only one well being used, rather than three as was originally intended, he said.

"As a result, the test that happened got nowhere near the original goal of simulating even a small section of the proposed quarry excavation face," Flint noted. "Any results drawn from this test will be unrepresentative of what (the) negative impacts the proposed full-scale quarry might have..."

Tuck said the PTTW clearly states that water will be pumped from just one well during the testing. Also, after meeting with Ministry of Environment (MOE) officials and the third party, independent hydrogeologist, it was decided that St. Marys didn't need to pump large volumes of water to get the data required for the first round of testing.

She denied claims that the test was a flop. "We believe it was a success," she said, again noting that the main focus was to get details about the surrounding aquifer.

Responding to Flint's assertion that record rainfall caused the groundwater system to become so saturated that data from the testing would be unreliable, the St. Marys official said extra water on the site caused "a bit of challenge" for surface water but "not in terms of groundwater." Details about the nature of the aquifer were still attainable despite the heavy rainfall, she said.

St. Marys has until September 5 to submit a report to the MOE on the findings of its first round of testing. After the ministry "signs off," the company can proceed with the next round which Tuck suggested will most likely occur this fall.