

Quarry testing application prompts flurry of public comment

Dianne Cornish

11/24/06 00:00:00

A campaign to send a flurry of e-mails to the MOE's (Ministry of the Environment's) regional office in Hamilton in hopes of halting the testing of an unproven groundwater recirculation system at a proposed quarry in northeast Flamborough is gaining momentum.

FORCE (Friends of Rural Communities and the Environment), a grassroots citizen's group protesting the proposed St. Mary's Flamborough Quarry, sent its objections to the Ministry this week asking for rejection of the Permit to Take Water (PTTW) application filed by CBM Aggregates of St. Mary's Cement last month. The group has also posted a template letter citing its concerns on its website (www.stopthequarry.ca) and is inviting members of the public to attach their names to it or use it as a basis for their own e-mails being sent to the MOE. All comments on the application must be submitted in writing to the Ministry by next Friday (Dec. 1). The emails should be directed to Cora.Sheppard@ontario.ca

A letter of concern has also been sent to the MOE by Flamborough councilor Margaret McCarthy.

St. Mary's Cement wants to test the groundwater recirculation system as a method of recharging the aquifer with water after it is pumped from the quarry floor. The system is touted as a mitigation measure that will hopefully lessen the impact of the quarry operation on groundwater in the area.

But FORCE chair Graham Flint contends the testing, as proposed in the company's 20-day PTTW application, is too risky and could do irreparable harm to the aquifer that feeds rural water wells in the area, as well as to the communal well system serving Carlisle.

"The (pump) testing is premature and very environmentally intrusive," he said. "They plan to use lots of water and make big holes in the ground." Of particular concern for FORCE is the mention of "blasting" in the documentation submitted by the company. Drilling holes into the ground and fracturing the aquifer during the recirculation process could lead to surface contaminants getting into the aquifer which feeds local wells, the group's e-mail to the MOE states.

Before any testing of the system is permitted, FORCE suggests other source water protection work that is less intrusive be completed first.

The tests entail pumping significant volumes of water (a maximum of 12,700 litres or 2.8 million gallons per day) for a period of 20 days. That equates to four times the amount used by the new enhanced Carlisle municipal water system, Flint charged. "The volume of water to be removed from the aquifer is significant and there is concern that there could be impact on existing water users," a background document on the FORCE website states.

But John Moroz, vice-president and general manager of CBM Aggregates, defends the company's decision to do the testing.

"We need to do this test," he stressed. "We told the community we would prove there would not be significant impacts on their water (because of the quarry) and this test needs to be done to prove that."

Responding to Flint's concerns on the timing, he said the community raised concerns about water and traffic at recent Open Houses. "We told residents we would go out and do the work," he said. "There are safeguards in place to ensure we don't contaminate the aquifer or impact the surrounding water supply."

McCarthy's letter suggests that if the testing is allowed to proceed, the wells of nearby residents be monitored to accurately gauge the impact of the tests. Like Flint, she also registered a concern about the large volume of water that will be discharged into Mountsberg Creek on the quarry site during the testing. Potential impacts to surface water, as well as ground water, are "of grave concern to me," McCarthy wrote.

The Flamborough councilor also suggested that the testing be heavily monitored and stopped immediately if detrimental results are detected in surrounding wells.

The company's PTTW application was filed Oct. 4 and posted by the MOE on its EBR (Environmental Bill of Rights) site eight days later. The original deadline for public comments was Nov. 13 but was extended to Dec. 1.

Paul Odom, supervisor of water resources for the Ministry's west central region's office in Hamilton, said the extension was an internal decision reflecting the Ministry's wish to allow community groups an opportunity to obtain information on the pumping tests before submitting their comments. Putting temporary PTTW applications on the EBR site is not required, but a decision was made to post the St. Mary's application "based on the perceived to be public interest" in the application, he added. After the comment period deadline, submissions will be reviewed by the MOE and a decision on the application will be made on or before Jan. 4, 2007, Odom said.