

Quarry water test unproven: McCarthy

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A plan by St. Mary's Cement to test a groundwater recirculation system at the proposed Mountsberg Quarry will allow Flamborough residents to be used "as guinea pigs" for an unproven system, Flamborough councillor Margaret McCarthy said this week.

Reacting to a letter from the Ministry of the Environment (MOE) to the aggregate company several weeks ago, McCarthy said, "It's unfathomable that the city be left with the responsibility but not with the authority for the decision" on the testing, which could jeopardize the water supply for users of the Carlisle water system as well as private well users in the area. She was referring to the MOE's authority to make a decision on St. Mary's temporary Permit To Take Water (PTTW) application and the City of Hamilton's responsibility to provide water to Carlisle residents.

St. Mary's filed the PTTW application with the MOE last October. The company's tests will entail pumping significant volumes of water from the ground (a maximum of 12.7 million litres or 2.8 million gallons per day) for a period of 20 days. St. Mary's wants to conduct the tests on the proposed site at the corner of 11th Concession East and Milborough Line.

Company spokesmen have said the tests are necessary to evaluate the system as a method of recharging the aquifer with water after it is pumped from the quarry floor. The system is being touted as a mitigation measure that will reduce the impact of the quarry operation on area groundwater.

Because the system has never been used in fractured limestone, the formation that holds the area's water supply, controversy had arisen over whether the test is too risky to allow.

McCarthy says the Ministry shares her apprehension about the tests and demonstrates that by advising St. Mary's in its recent letter that "the review of the application before us involves technologies which have not previously been applied in such a scenario. Consequently, we are proceeding with caution on this application to ensure that, should we allow it to proceed, the approach used will protect local water resources and have negligible impacts on local water users."

The letter also notes that the Ministry views the proposed test "as no more than a preliminary step and well removed from a full scale operation."

Given the water problems that have plagued the Carlisle area in past years and the fact that the water recirculation system is an untested theory, McCarthy contends that granting the PTTW is tantamount to allowing Flamborough residents to be used as an experiment.

"My whole premise is we're the lab mice and guinea pigs," she said.

"I don't agree with that," said John Moroz, vice-president and general manager of CBM Aggregates of St. Mary's Cement. "We are absolutely not using residents as guinea pigs."

Moroz said the testing is needed to allay residents' concerns about the proposed quarry's impact on area groundwater. The company needs to do the testing "to prove to them that we will have minimal impact on their well water," he stated.

McCarthy also takes issue with the closing sentence in the MOE's letter that advises St. Mary's of its liability if the tests proceed. "We wish to make it clear that the Ministry deems that any impact occurring from the test, were the test to be approved, to be the liability of St. Mary's Cement Inc. (Canada)," the letter concludes.

If the tests result in Carlisle being left without water, the Ministry will order the city to fix the water

supply system, she said, charging that the Ministry's warning is really "a red herring" because the responsibility to provide water rests with the municipality.

"Liability always exists with the permit holder," stressed Paul Odom, supervisor of water resources with the MOE's Hamilton regional office. He mentioned it in the Ministry letter to ensure that St. Mary's officials were aware of it, not because it is anything different from the norm, he explained.

The company's PTTW application drew some 600 submissions from organizations and individuals objecting to the tests, including one from the City of Hamilton expressing concern that the high volumes of water required for the testing could place a strain on the local water supply. Area residents also raised concerns about the potential impact on the quality and quantity of water.

The company's application is on hold until St. Mary's provides additional technical information to the MOE. Moroz said the company plans to submit the details by the end of June.

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