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Residents, activists call for more testing at landfill

Reactions vary after meeting on alleged pollution at Brandywine site

by Zoe Tillman | Staff Writer

Brandywine area residents and environmental advocacy groups are calling for more testing of local groundwater following a Jan. 27 community meeting about alleged contamination from a local landfill. Several local environmental groups organized the meeting after a Jan. 15 announcement by the Maryland Department of the Environment that it planned to sue Atlanta-based regional power company Mirant Mid-Atlantic LLC, which has offices in Washington, D.C., and Landover, for alleged violations of the federal Clean Water Act at its Brandywine Coal Combustion Waste Landfill.



Citing MDE reports of site testing that revealed high levels of several chemicals in groundwater around the site, state officials have accused Mirant of allowing pollutants to seep from coal combustion waste byproducts at the landfill without a permit.

The environmental groups that helped host the meeting — the Patuxent Riverkeeper, Environmental Integrity Project, Defenders of Wildlife, Sierra Club and the Chesapeake Climate Action Network — also issued a similar notice of intent to sue Mirant on Nov. 19, but stepped aside to let the state agency handle any future legal action. Under the guidelines of the Clean Water Act, the MDE can file a lawsuit against Mirant 60 days after it notifies them of their intent to sue.

More than 50 residents from around southern Prince George's County gathered at the Baden Volunteer Fire Department to hear presentations from environmentalists and Mirant spokeswoman Misty Allen.

Christopher Rowe, a University of Maryland environmental science researcher, showed slides documenting previous research on how some chemicals that may have been discharged from

the Brandywine landfill harmed wildlife at other sites in the Carolinas. He did not speak specifically about the Brandywine site.

Although Allen declined to answer any specific questions about landfill activities, citing pending legal action, she announced that the company has plans to recycle coal combustion waste byproducts in the future, rather than add it to the landfill.

"Our purpose was to introduce the company and let the community know that we're here and that we're accessible," she said after the meeting. Mirant has maintained that it is operating in full compliance with its permits.

Aquasco resident Doris Davis said she was frustrated by the fact that Allen couldn't speak more specifically about the site. She hoped the environmental groups or the MDE would do more groundwater testing throughout the region.

"This is all new to me...we weren't aware of all the problems," she said, adding that she is worried about contamination of places where she and her neighbors go fishing. "I just think that we're in harm's way."

Rowe said after the meeting that he would like to test more sites around Brandywine, but his department doesn't have the funding at this time. He was unavailable to speak about the cost of testing by press time.

In its notice of intent to sue, the MDE did note that "the groundwater and surface water contamination does not appear to pose an immediate risk to public health."

Linda Hutton, who also lives in Aquasco, said she left the meeting "feeling a lot better." Her husband, Phil Hutton, who has a background in environmental science, agreed.

"It doesn't look like there was some evil intent," Phil Hutton said. "I don't see anything that hints that any of us should have to worry."

Prince George's County Council Chairman Thomas E. Dernoga (D-Dist. 1) of Laurel also attended the meeting, citing his interest in environmental issues. He said he remembered that when planning officials and the District Council approved an extension for Mirant's permit to operate the landfill in 2007, the company reported that site operations would not harm the environment.

"If the special exception was based on false information, we could look at it again," he said, referring to the permit.