

Landfill seethes beneath surface

Ohio EPA official says blazes might continue for years at Pike dump

By Bob Downing
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The chemical reaction and fires inside a landfill in southern Stark County are continuing — with little evidence that the problem is lessening.

That assessment came from Ohio Environmental Protection Agency spokesman Mike Settles, based on monthly reports Republic Services Inc., which owns and operates the Countywide Recycling & Disposal Facility in Pike Township, submits to his agency.

Little has changed since 2009, and there is no indication the landfill is a threat to neighbors, Settles said. The EPA still expects the reaction and subsurface fires that were triggered by buried aluminum waste coming in contact with leachate, or landfill liquids, to slowly die out.

"There is no way to accurately predict how long that will take," he said.

In mid-2009, the state and federal EPAs had said the reaction and fires might continue for years.

The problem is centered on a 88-acre tract. That section contains and isolates the fires, which will be allowed to

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continue until they burn themselves out. It is covered with a synthetic liner to keep moisture out and pungent gases in.

More than 200 extraction wells collect the gases.

The 258-acre landfill remains very hot, according to data submitted to the EPA.

The maximum temperatures continue to be steady, just above 200 degrees, and the average landfill temperature continues to register in the 140-degree range, Settles said.

Normal landfill temperatures are 120 to 130 degrees.

Landfill temperatures at Countywide hit 270 degrees in 2008.

In September 2010, the highest temperature was just above 200 degrees. The average was just below 150 degrees.

Settles said the EPA is "not concerned about so little change" in landfill temperatures in recent years.

The agency says the landfill's excessive heat might have compromised the liner, but proving if that happened is almost impossible. There are layers of clay under the liner that probably would prevent problems, and there are groundwater monitoring wells around the site. The agency has no evidence of leakage from the liner, Settles said.

The number of landfill odor complaints in southern Stark and northern Tuscarawas counties are low, he said, calling that a good sign and evidence that the controls initiated at the landfill are working.

In the past 12 months, there have been four odor complaints, only one of which was verified, Settles said.

Republic Services and the EPA are keeping an eye on landfill settlement and slope stability.

That's because fires will cause buried waste to break down faster than usual. That will create cavities that will be filled in by upper wastes. That accelerated settlement is expected to cause continued settlement problems at Countywide, Settles said.

Air monitors outside the landfill show nothing of concern, he said.

In a new development, the company and the Ohio EPA have agreed on a plan to add a synthetic cover to the final section of the 88 acres. Installation is expected in the spring.

The final landfill cap also includes 18 inches of clay, 30 inches of soil plus a geotextile layer. It will go atop 19.4 acres on the east side of the remediation area. That section is now topped with soil. It has not been affected by the aluminum reaction and fires.

Republic Services is pleased by what's not happening at Countywide, spokesman Michael Darnell said.

"The reaction is not over. It is still present. But it's being managed and contained," Darnell said. "It's not creating problems. That was the goal three to four years ago."

Landfill neighbors are still concerned by what's happening at Countywide, said Dick Harvey, spokesman for the grass-roots group Club 3000.

"It's not changed. It's still on fire. It's still burning," he said. "It's not really changed, except

there are no odors."

Harvey said he was disappointed to learn the Ohio EPA no longer considers Countywide a high-interest site in terms of posting records immediately, as had been done. Such records can still be obtained through the agency's Columbus office.

Countywide's problem was discovered in late 2005 and early 2006 when noxious odors from the landfill repeatedly fouled the air for neighbors.

The fires were traced to a chemical reaction triggered when buried aluminum waste, called dross or salt cake, came into contact with landfill liquids. The dross was dumped legally into the landfill.

Republic Services, based in Florida, has spent \$85 million since early 2006 to correct the problems at Countywide.

The firm paid a \$10 million fine to the Ohio EPA for past violations — \$3 million to go to local projects and \$7 million to the Ohio EPA.

Republic Services is using the other 170 acres at Countywide to take trash from Summit and other counties in Northeast Ohio. The landfill sits on 921 acres and is one of the largest in Ohio, taking in about 1,500 tons of refuse daily. It is authorized to accept up to 7,800 tons. It has 100 years of capacity.

A civil lawsuit against Republic Services by landfill neighbors is scheduled to go to trial March 4 in Tuscarawas County. The suit originally had 600 individuals and families. It will be tried with 10 plaintiffs, said attorney Steve Bell of Brecksville.

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