



Ethanol plant poised to clear another hurdle?

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By Natalie J. Ostgaard, City Editor

Agassiz Energy LLC's plans for an ethanol plant located near Erskine should move one step closer to reality when the Polk County Board of Commissioners meets Tuesday. That's when the board is set to approve a letter addressed to the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency stating that the county landfill will accept coal ash from the facility. According to Tom Jorgens, a principal with Agassiz Energy, this is a key component in the Environmental Assessment Worksheet and permitting process, and will push the company significantly closer to receiving the necessary permits.

This issue is not quite so cut and dried, however.

Solid Waste Manager Bill Wilson presented the report from Rod Ambrosie of Wenck Associates, Inc., the consultant on the matter. Wenck conducted an evaluation to determine the impact disposing approximately 40 tons of coal ash per day, the amount expected to be generated by the ethanol plant, would have on the Polk County Landfill.

Possibilities

Ambrosie came up with three options to consider: dispose of the coal ash in the municipal solid waste (MSW) cell, in the current incinerator ash cell or build a new industrial cell. Any one of those would require a change in the county's industrial solid waste management plan and would increase costs of operating, maintenance and staff, the report pointed out.

Disposing the coal ash in the MSW area would be the least desirable option, according to Ambrosie. It would drastically reduce the life of the MSW site from 25 years to 9 to 12 years, affect leachate quality and quantity, and produce more blowing dust emissions, along with other problems.

The second option faces more problems. In addition to similar issues as the first option, this would require a time-consuming EAW, drastically reduce the life of the ash site from 40.8 years to 7 to 10 years and could complicate ash utilization.

Building a new cell would be the most practical alternative, Ambrosie suggested, though costly. The county would need to buy more than 40 acres of property and permit the new site at a cost of \$200,000 to \$300,000, among other things.

"This could end up costing about \$1.5 million after taking everything into consideration," Wilson said.

"The only problem with this is there are so many unknowns," Commissioner Gerald Jacobson pointed out. "What if down the road they find coal ash is valuable for other uses? Then we're stuck with massive space."

An important consideration is what to do with the additional leachate. Currently, the material is hauled to Crookston's wastewater treatment plant, but a discussion with the city would be in order if there were significant changes, Ambrosie noted.

"The importance of the current leachate disposal arrangement is critical and Polk can not afford to compromise this relationship," he wrote in the report.

Wilson added that the county must also consider the relationship of the landfill and incinerator, as they work together as one, and the five counties involved in the consortium. Cutting the life of sites could disrupt the balance and has the potential to cause serious problems.

He posed another option that would work in the short run: add another cell to the landfill.

"Right now, we have room for about two and a half more cells," he explained. "We can add a cell pretty easily."

While this solution wouldn't work in the long run, Wilson stressed, "it could hold the ash for a couple of years and give us time to look at other options."

He suggested signing a two-year agreement with Agassiz Energy, giving the company time to develop another option for ash disposal.

"We'd prefer to have a letter of commitment to this project open-ended, with no time stated," Jorgens said. "A letter of intent doesn't need a lot of details."

He and two other principals attending the meeting agreed that, in addition to the letter, a separate contract agreement could be worked out between the county and Agassiz Energy. However, because of the time element, they need to show the MPCA that the county is willing to accept the ash.

"To me the quickest solution would be to add a cell," said Commissioner Bill Montague. "Then we can both work on a long-term solution. Two years buys us both time for permitting and other things. That way we don't have a big investment, either."

Commissioners informally agreed to do that and later set up an agreement with the company. The project is good for economic development throughout the region and the county should do everything it can to help it move forward, Commissioner Warren Strandell emphasized.

The landfill would likely charge \$45 a ton for the coal ash, the same that it charges the University of Minnesota, Crookston, Wilson said. The landfill currently takes in about 80 tons of coal ash a year from UMC, which it uses for cover at the site.

One of the long-term solutions could involve an on-site ash disposal area near the ethanol plant. The main thing holding that option back right now is time, said Jorgens, as it would require a separate permit and EAW. But the company will definitely look closer at this, he added.

Jorgens said if everything goes well, the ethanol plant, which would operate 350 days per year, could open early in 2008.