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Mittal waste draws attention

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Post-Tribune staff writer

BURNS HARBOR -- Waste piles dumped at ArcelorMittal Burns Harbor are raising eyebrows at the Indiana Department of Environmental Management.

IDEM, which is processing an application from ArcelorMittal for a landfill, has sent a letter to the company, asking where it has dumped 83,000 tons of steel-making waste intended to be disposed of in a landfill.

IDEM spokeswoman Amy Hartsock said in an e-mail that IDEM requested clarification of where waste is coming from within the steel plant "so inspectors will know which streams have been approved for disposal in the landfill."

The letter mentions 60,000 tons of basic oxygen furnace sludge, 19,000 tons of sinter plant thickener sludge and 4,000 tons of coal, coke and sand. The company has 60 days from receipt of the Oct. 28 letter to respond to IDEM's questions.

The agency has been processing the landfill permit application for about a year and a half, but did not officially raise questions about where the sludge, coal and coke was stored until two months after the Post-Tribune asked questions about massive waste piles dumped directly on the ground at the steel mill for years.

The letter was posted in IDEM's online database Nov. 23 -- eight days after the Post-Tribune published an investigation revealing that one of ArcelorMittal's predecessors, Bethlehem Steel Corp., was dumping waste openly in 1999 while IDEM Commissioner Tom Easterly was in charge of environmental matters at the mill.

One of the waste piles is known by ArcelorMittal representatives and IDEM staff as "Easterly's pile." It spreads across 33 acres in the northeast corner of the company's property about 200 feet from the Indiana Dunes National Lakeshore and Lake Michigan.

The company told the Post-Tribune it intends to landfill the pile. IDEM said it is not under that impression.

The company has identified on maps at least two other piles of waste that are dumped or stockpiled for recycling and will go into the landfill, but "Easterly's pile" isn't one of them.

The company has generally explained the types of waste that will go into the landfill (such as secondary wastewater treatment plant sludge and blast furnace filter cake) but not what kind of waste is in "Easterly's pile." The company hasn't submitted a chemical analysis of waste specifically marked as being from that area either.

Under state law, companies are required to submit a chemical analysis of every type of waste it intends to landfill to make sure that the waste is compatible with the other waste going into the landfill and to make sure the landfill will be sufficiently protective of the environment.

The waste has been sitting for years with no environmental controls on the ground at the steel plant as little as one foot above groundwater. Depending on what's in it, it could pose an environmental threat, environmentalists say. If chemicals in the waste are above hazardous levels or if parts of it were not recycled, the company has been violating environmental laws for years with no repercussions. In that case, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency would have jurisdiction and could pursue enforcement.

IDEM is holding a public hearing on ArcelorMittal's landfill permit application Wednesday, Dec. 2, in Portage, when people can make comments and ask questions.

Fate of "Easterly's pile" unknown: A pile of steel-making waste can be seen near Lake Michigan in this aerial view of ArcelorMittal in Burns Harbor. -- Post-Tribune file photo

If you go

What: The Indiana Department of Environmental Management public hearing to get written and oral comments on ArcelorMittal's landfill permit application.

People who testify are requested to submit a written copy of their statement. Written statements may be submitted to IDEM up to 10 days after the hearing.

IDEM will not respond to questions immediately, but in writing once the agency issues the permit. Copies of IDEM's response to comments can be requested by calling (317) 232-8734 or by writing to IDEM's Alicia Brown at the address below. Copies will be sent to everyone who testifies and includes a return address.

When: 6-9 p.m. Wednesday, Dec. 2.

Where: Northwestern Indiana Regional Planning Commission, 6100 Southport Road in Portage.

More information

IDEM staff at the Office of Land Quality can discuss the contents of the application by phone at (317) 232-8734, or people can make an appointment to visit the office.

Comments should be addressed to:

Alicia Brown
Indiana Department of Environmental Management
Office of Land Quality
Solid Waste Permits Section

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