

Friends of Mississippi River push for cleanup of Ford Plant landfill

MPCA has yet to determine risks posed by riverside dump

BY JANE McCLURE

The Friends of the Mississippi River (FMR) is calling for Ford Motor Company to excavate and remove an old industrial waste landfill near the Mississippi River before selling that parcel and the rest of the 144 acres of Ford's former assembly plant in Highland Park. FMR contends that there are significant risks in the waste being so close to the river. The organization met with the Highland District Council in May and will return to the HDC when more information on the pollution becomes available.

The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency has worked with Ford and its environmental consultants for decades on a study and the cleanup of pollution at the plant, and the MPCA contends that its ongoing well monitoring has not detected a public health risk.

"We're continuing to collect samples from monitoring wells and continuing to study that data," said Amy Hadaris, who is leading the cleanup efforts on the Ford site for the MPCA. "We're monitoring the site and looking at what can be done to protect the river and groundwater."

A decision has not been made on what to do with the old landfill, which is known as Area C. A report from Ford's environmental consultants is due later this year or early next year, according to Ford and the MPCA. The report will outline and evaluate various options for cleanup according to federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) standards, Hadaris said.

According to FMR, the MPCA's Voluntary Investigation and Cleanup Program lacks the staff and resources to adequately address the pollution at the Ford site. FMR executive director Whitney Clark said that while the intent is not to disparage Ford, its consultants or the MPCA, "we're concerned that all of the risks haven't been addressed. We believe there is a need for much more exhaustive analysis." The Ford site, Clark added, may need to be put on the EPA's Superfund list of polluted sites.

FMR has hired its own geotechnical consultants to look at the Ford property and pore through the thousands of pages of completed environmental studies. One preliminary conclusion reached by FMR through site sampling is that Area C shows an "uncontrolled, environmental risk" as waste could be pushed into the area's aquifer and into the river through a rinsing process, according to Clark.

"I've always said that before Ford leaves the site they need to take the pollution with them," said Ward 3 City Council member Chris Tolbert. As for excavating and removing the waste in Area C, Tolbert said he is waiting to see the next reports from Ford's consultants and the MPCA. According to recent reports by the city, Ford consultants and the MPCA, Area C was a dumping ground for such industrial wastes as construction rubble, paint sludge and old paint and solvents at Ford. Materials excavated from two other landfills at the Ford Plant also ended up there.

Ford used the Area C landfill from 1945-66. Various reports estimate the waste pile to be about 25 feet from top to bottom. About 30 to 60 feet of fill has been placed on top of the waste, including concrete and soil construction debris from Ford in the 1960s.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers deposited rubble there during the reconstruction of Lock and Dam No. 1 in 1975. About 19,000 cubic yards of concrete, 10,000 cubic yards of sandstone and 18,000 cubic yards of sand generated as part of a lock and dam rehabilitation project were also placed there in 1981. In the mid-1980s, Ford placed more debris and soil there from construction of its paint building. In 1985-87 the site was covered with an 8-inch-thick concrete cap.

The buried Ford waste is believed to contain paint waste, solidified paint sludge, scrap steel, brick, concrete block, wood chunks and contaminated soil. The primary contaminants associated with these materials include metals such as lead, cobalt, cadmium, manganese, chromium and non-chlorinated solvents such as toluene, methyl ethyl ketone, methyl isobutyl ketone, and xylene. Paint and painting processes are believed to be the source of most of the contaminants.

Metals and non-chlorinated solvents are consistent with compounds that have been detected during sampling, according to the reports. The reports also list several volatile and semi-volatile organic compounds, metals, organics from gasoline and diesel fuels, and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs).

According to Hadaris, Ford and its environmental consultants will submit a report to the MPCA once its cleanup work is done, and the state will determine if the cleanup is satisfactory. Hadaris said that Ford is cleaning the property atop the bluff to a standard that allows for residential as well as commercial developments. As for the property beneath the blufftop, the options are pending.

The last report on environmental conditions at Area C and the rest of Ford's property was issued a year ago. The city of St. Paul, FMR, the National Parks Service and the Capitol Region Watershed District were all invited to comment on the report, and the MPCA responded to their comments earlier this year. All four commenters raised concerns about Area C, how the underground waste and local groundwater are being addressed, and how pollution will be mitigated.

"Robust groundwater monitoring at Area C is ongoing," Hadaris said. The MPCA, she added, is continuing to study how changes to the water table, the Prairie du Chien-Jordan aquifer and the Mississippi River create hydrostatic issues and pressures on the buried waste. Unlike the blufftop property, the riverside property cannot be built on because it is so close to the river, Hadaris said. The steam plant there could be reused, but nothing new could be built, she said.