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Health concerns over water test for quarry

Could cut off or contaminate groundwater

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The Hamilton Spectator

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Hamilton's health department says the planned test of a water-pumping system designed to dry out a proposed 13-storey-deep Flamborough quarry presents enough risk to constitute a public health hazard.

City officials warned last May that the test planned by St. Marys Cement could drain Carlisle's municipal wells.

Now the health department has formally notified the Ministry of the Environment (MOE) of concern that pumping up to 12.7 million litres a day might cut off or contaminate groundwater supplies needed by nearby housing surveys and the Carlisle settlement area.

The department says in a letter to the MOE that the test presents "a reasonable and probable risk of causing a public health concern in the form of adverse groundwater quantity and quality impacts." It lists a series of measures it says are needed to ensure the test is safe.

The notice was issued Oct. 26 under Section 11 of the Health Protection and Promotion Act -- the first one issued in Ontario for a water-taking permit application from an existing or proposed quarry, according to Flamborough citizens' group Friends of Rural Communities and the Environment (FORCE). Section 11 requires public health officials who receive a complaint of an occupational or environmental health hazard to notify the ministry involved and jointly investigate.

Bill Bardswick, the MOE's Hamilton-based regional director for Central West Ontario, said it's the first such notice he's seen "and I have worked here for a number of years."

But Eric Mathews, manager of the city's health protection branch, said hazard complaints often go to provincial ministries via phone or e-mail; the quarry notice is unusual only in that it involves a letter.

John Moroz, vice-president of St. Marys, said the company has listened to input from the public and from a multi-agency team reviewing the quarry application, and believes needed safeguards are built into plans for the site on 11th Concession East at Milborough Line.

Rick Smith, executive director of the national, nonprofit advocacy group Environmental Defence, describes the health department letter in a news release as "a wake-up call to provincial decision-makers. This application (for a water-taking permit) challenges both the protection of Ontario's Greenbelt and implementation of the new Clean Water Act."

In an interview, he said: "Our expectation is nothing more and nothing less than the provincial government living up to its own rhetoric by putting the kibosh on this project. This project (the quarry) is a bad idea, period, for water conservation and public health. What more does the province need to intervene?"

Mathews, who has met with ministry staff since sending the letter, said the proposed groundwater recirculation system needs to be tested, "but it needs to be done in a manner that diminishes the risk of offsite impacts as much as possible."

Bardswick said the ministry won't decide on the water permit until completing its consultation with the health department.

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