

RESIDENTS 'LEFT IN DARK' BY TONGAAT

Effluent plant raises stink

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THE planned installation of an effluent treatment plant by KwaZulu-Natal's largest sugar producer has left residents around the development – who claim to have been excluded from the process – fuming.

The Maidstone Mill Effluent Treatment Plant and Pollution Control Dam in Tongaat has become a bone of contention since February when the environmental impact assessment became publicly available for comment.

According to the assessment conducted by consultants WSP Parsons Brinckerhoff, Tongaat Hulett was “proposing a sustainable long-term solution” for managing the effluent generated at its Maidstone Sugar Mill.

The solution is proposed to comprise of the development of a (treatment) plant to treat the mill's effluent prior to discharge to the Tongati River and a stormwater pollution control dam.

The consultants said in the same document that the potential benefits included a decrease in potential for surface water contamination from excess effluent and storm water, and a decrease in odour, compared to the current practice of using effluent for irrigation.

“There are potential negative impacts including short-term (construction and decommissioning impacts) and the potential operational water quality and ecological impacts as a result of a failure of the plant or dam containment structures.”

The residents maintain they had not been given proper notification of meetings; that no local newspapers were used to advertise the plans and posters were placed at “impractical locations” for genuinely affected parties.

They also said no flyers or notification of the construction had been given to Maidstone residents.

Ashwin Singh, who has lived in the area for 19 years, said the company had not told them any details of the project. “There's been very little engagement. The immediate concern is for our health and that of the children in the area. If this project is to go ahead, we could face serious problems.”

Another resident of 15 years, Harold Maistry, said the area already suffered the negative impacts of pollution.

“We don't know what chemicals will be treated here, and what the impacts on us will be. We're very concerned.”

Several other residents spoke to The Mercury under the condition of anonymity. One said he felt “completely excluded” from the

process. “It's like I don't live here, like this will not affect me.”

Another long-time resident suggested the plant should be built far from residential areas. “If there's a breakdown, or a leak, what will the consequences be for us?”

Another resident who had been living in Maidstone for 32 years said she had not been aware of the development until she was asked questions about it by The Mercury.

“That makes me angry because this is my home. I feel like I should know what goes on in my backyard.”

The residents held a meeting this week, where they discussed their concerns with Tongaat Hulett representatives.

South Durban Community and Environmental Alliance project co-ordinator, Desmond D'Sa, who attended the meeting, said: “We've seen what has happened in the Durban South Basin, and the health consequences for the people there. Look at the Upper Highway area. This can't be allowed to happen here too.”

Comments deadline

Residents, he said, wanted peer review studies to be conducted to assess the possible consequences.

They also requested regular site visits, and for the comments process to be extended from its original May 31 deadline.

Communication executive for Tongaat-Hulett Michelle Jean-Louis said in response to The Mercury's queries this week that the plant had been planned, given that the company's other South African mills had similar facilities for the treatment of biodegradable sugar mill by-products.

She said in terms of the application process, engagement with stakeholders started in mid-2013 and had been ongoing. “This engagement process includes this week's interaction with the community.”

Environmental epidemiology specialist and environmental health campaign manager at NGO Groundwork, Rico Euripidou, explained that it was a growing trend for communities to be concerned about how industrial pollution and environmental health factors could affect their health.

“If the plant proposed will emit odours that people can smell all the time because it's situated near where they live, then I think that people have every right to be concerned about this. If this plant is being designed to treat toxic waste, these waste streams have to be transported into the community resulting in more truck vehicle movements, which contribute to air pollution and will over time contribute to more traffic accidents.”