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Canning company official promises relief, blames lagoon problems on cold spring and warm summer

Village of Belgium residents not only have to contend with the haze and odors from a large wildfire in Minnesota (see story on page 1), but also with odors from Lakeside Foods' wastewater lagoon system.

The canning company's lagoon has been especially pungent the last few days, village board members agreed Monday.

Village President Richard Howells said he received many phone calls from residents complaining about the smell.

"I've been there two to three times and they're putting out some big money to rectify this," Village President Richard Howells said. "The pond is finally filled and Jeromy (Nickelsen, general manager for the Belgium plant) said it should get better in a few days."

Not all the odors can be blamed on Lakeside, Howells said, noting the village is rimmed on three sides by farms on which manure is spread or injected into the ground.

But there is no doubt the lagoon has been especially foul this summer, Nickelsen said Tuesday.

In its lagoon system, solids from the canning process settle to the bottom and the liquid that rises to the top is aerated until it is sprayed on a nearby farm field, Nickelsen said.

With the wet spring, the wastewater couldn't be sprayed on the fields, so the excess was put into a holding pond without aeration. That was emptied when the dry weather arrived, but by then the solids in the aerated lagoon had built up to the point it had to be removed. That must be done every few years.

"It's the solids that get into the air and create the odors," Nickelsen said.

The lagoon was dredged, but the aerator couldn't be turned on until the pond was filled with wastewater.

With the hot, humid weather, the odors were strong, Nickelsen siad.

"We turned the aerator on two days ago, It's just like in the spring when it starts up again. It will be pungent for a few days then dissipate. It's been sitting for awhile and the hot tempeature makes it worse," he said. "Now that it's cooling down, that's a good thing."

He estimated the smell would dissipate by the end of the week.

Nickelsen said the lagoon will be equipped with a system that removes the solids before it goes into the lagoon. That should prevent odors and the lagoon won't have to be dredged.

"We're committed to making that investment and solving the problem," he said.

The Belgium plant is canning green beans now, then will can beets and end the season with potatoes.

The wet spring meant some crops weren't planted, which resulted in production lags, Nickelsen said. The quality of the beans varies from field to field and even within a field.

"Some are great and some beans are hollow, so we have to check all of them on the line," he said. "Overall, the yields weren't that bad."