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Intermittent stench from decaying vegetable waste in canning company's storage lagoon remains a problem

On Mother's Day, a foul odor from Lakeside Foods' lagoon in Belgium spoiled some outdoor picnics, prompting several residents to complain to Village President Richard Howells and some officials to call for a stronger stand against the canning company.

For longtime residents, it was an ongoing nuisance. But for newer residents, who aren't accustomed to dealing with the stench of rotting vegetables, it was unpalatable.

"If this is an ongoing problem and many residents have complained, do we have any recourse?" Trustee Ken Hirschmann asked at Monday's Village Board meeting. "Mother's Day at dinner time is not a real good time to start their stench."

Trustee Jason Acevedo said, "They're a big corporation. They're going to take the easy and cheap way out. Why should they do something if we're not going to make them?"

Trustee Vickie Boehnlein talked to the Department of Natural Resources about the odors and possible state enforcement, but said she had no success because the company is not in violation of its permit.

"We could pass an odor ordinance, but how do you enforce it?" she asked. "Litigation? Kick them out? Can our economic base really afford that?"

Howells and Neil Anderson, wastewater treatment supervisor, said they talk frequently with Jeromy Nickelsen, general manager of the Belgium plant who is trying to resolve the odor problem.

"It's not an easy fix and it's not a cheap fix," Howells said. "It depends on which way the wind is blowing. If it's from the north, no complaints. If from the south or west, we get the aroma and the phone starts ringing."

The company is making significant improvements in the lagoon's aeration system that should reduce the odors, Anderson said.

"It's vegetable matter. The amount and type of vegetables they process make a difference. It's not like a municipal sewage treatment plant, where you treat the same thing all the time," Anderson said.

When asked about the complaints Tuesday, Nickelsen said the company is draining the lagoon so a new aeration system that will be used year-round can be installed. The lagoon should be empty soon, he said.

"We're exposing the bottom, so we'll flush it with clean water to push it through," Nickelsen

said.

He likened the odor to rotting potatoes, which he admitted is not pleasant.

The current aeration system cannot be used in winter when the lagoon freezes so the vegetable waste sits on the bottom. When the aeration system is started up in the spring, that's when the worst odors occur, he said. That usually lasts about a week, but that wasn't done this year, he said.

The new system will aerate from the bottom so the ice cover won't affect it, he said, and the solids will stay suspended until pumped out and sprayed on nearby fields.

The company, he said, is waiting for approval from the DNR for the new aeration system and for permission to move its equalization tank, which separates solids from the processing water at the plant, to the lagoon. The company is also seeking to move its dissolved air flotation (DAF) unit to the lagoon, which removes smaller particles of waste, so the lagoon water should be clearer.

Nickelsen said, the lagoon won't be used again until mid-July when green beans are canned.

"None of this is perfect science," he said. "We have to deal with bean, beet, then potato water and each need different treatment. Potatoes are so starchy, it takes a lot more aeration. The biggest issue is that potatoes are the last crop we run so that's what's in the lagoon all winter and when we start up in spring.

It's easier to remove solids when they are suspended in the water so the new dual filtering system should help, Nickelsen said.

Water from the lagoon is sprayed on farm fields. The solids are taken to a local cattle farmer, who feeds it to his animals.

The improvements, he said, will cost $125,000 to $500,000, depending upon the plan the DNR approves.

"The odor is no different than it's been, but some people are newer to it," Nickelsen said. "We're trying something every year."

He said Applied Science in Madison is working with Lakeside Foods to solve the odor problem.

The issue will be discussed again at the June 14 Village Board when Lakeside officials will be asked to explain the steps they are taking to reduce the odors.