

Residents, activists appeal sludge plant

ENVIRONMENT: An official disagrees with claims over the proposed Mojave Desert treatment facility.

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The residents of a remote Mojave Desert town whose battle with groundwater pollution was made famous in the film "Erin Brockovich" are tackling what they say is a new environmental threat.

Hinkley, about 15 miles west of Barstow, is the site of a proposed open-air sewage sludge treatment facility. Residents and activists filed an appeal Friday to the San Bernardino County Board of Supervisors seeking to overturn the county Planning Commission's approval of the project Nov. 30.

They allege it would increase traffic, air pollution, noxious odors and greenhouse gases that contribute to global warming. It is also being built on land harboring desert tortoises, a federally protected species, they said.

The appeal will be heard before the supervisors at their Dec. 19 meeting, said Julie Rynerson, the county's deputy director of current planning.

She said the Planning Commission approved the project only after extensive environmental review. She said she disagrees with the allegations of those who filed the appeal.

According to documents, the 160-acre facility proposed by Nursery Products would collect up to 2,000 tons per day of biosolids from sewage treatment plants and green materials from Riverside and San Bernardino counties. Over a year, the facility would process 400,000 tons of waste to make compost for use on agricultural fields.

The project, eight miles west of Hinkley, is upwind from homes and an elementary school, said activists who are worried about air pollution generated by the facility.

"The desert has notoriously been a dumping ground for the more urban areas," said Norman Diaz, a commercial location scout whose two children attend Hinkley Elementary School.

Brian Lochrie, a Nursery Products spokesman, said the project will reduce traffic-generated air pollution because biosolids are usually trucked farther to Arizona and Kern County.

Kassie Siegel, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity, said the facility should be enclosed to prevent methane from escaping. Methane is a greenhouse gas.

Lochrie said enclosing the facility would cost almost \$100 million rather than the \$1 million price tag for the proposed structure.

The facility, he conceded, would emit large amounts of volatile organic compounds. Known as VOCs, the compounds are a precursor to ozone, which is a main ingredient of smog.

Lochrie said if the waste is otherwise put in a landfill in a more populated region in Southern California, the compounds would be released into the atmosphere and blow into the desert anyway.

The Mojave Desert Air Quality Management District does not regulate VOCs from composting facilities because it is the region's first such operation, said Violette Roberts, a district spokeswoman.

She said the district has a so-called nuisance rule that would allow residents the chance to voice complaints if there are problems once the facility is built.

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