

Gadsden Water suspends letter of acceptance for proposed rendering plant's wastewater

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Gadsden Water Works and Sewer Board has suspended its letter saying it could accept wastewater from the proposed Pilgrim's Pride rendering plant.

The decision was announced in another letter sent Feb. 26 to the Alabama Department of Environmental Management. That letter, provided by General Manager Chad Hare, said that since the board's original letter to ADEM in October, "Pilgrim's has not received approval to locate or operate at the referenced address."

"Currently, Gadsden Water does not have sewer collection infrastructure in place to serve that address and given the absence of approval of the location and the ever-increasing uncertainty regarding the operation of the facility, and the undefined timeframe for such approvals, it cannot be reasonably expected to commit public funds to expand its infrastructure to that location at this time," the letter continued.

"Furthermore, continuing forward without these determinations would require Gadsden Water to commit resources including system capacity to this proposed industry, limiting our ability to evaluate other potential growth for an indeterminate time," it said.

"Because of these uncertainties' impact on our ability to adequately evaluate and prepare to service this location at this time, Gadsden Water is suspending the October 22, 2020, 'Permission to discharge' letter provided to Pilgrim's Pride and we respectfully request the issuance of the draft SID permit be delayed until these matters have been resolved."

Also provided was an email from ADEM to Barry Glover of Pilgrim's Pride, stating ADEM could not issue an indirect discharge permit for the proposed plant without a letter from a facility that would accept wastewater from the plant.

Coosa Riverkeeper Director Justin Overton was pleased.

"This is 'no' for now," said Overton, whose organization has been heavily involved in opposition to the proposed plant.

However, other sources close to the project categorized it more as a delay than a derailment.

And Pilgrim's Pride representatives say the company is still committed to the project.

"Pilgrim's remains absolutely committed to building a state-of-the-art pet food ingredient plant in Gadsden, which would create great-paying jobs and bring millions in economic activity to Etowah County," Mark Glover, head of Pilgrim's Pride protein conversion division, said.

"We agree with Mr. Hare that all parties involved would benefit from a defined project timeline," he said in a statement. "We are confident that Gadsden Water authority has the capacity and Pilgrim's has the right water treatment technology to create a sustainable operation of which all Gadsden can be proud."

Glover said the City of Gadsden and its residents will benefit from "increased funding for its water and sewer system through significant rates paid by Pilgrim's for water and sewer service."

He said Pilgrim's welcomes the opportunity to "have dialogue with Mr. Hare, the City Council and local leaders to determine a viable timeline to build the pet food ingredient plant" which will bring "great-paying jobs" and a \$70 million investment to Gadsden.

Overton said she's pleased that Gadsden Water has acknowledged issues with capacity at its Gadsden West treatment plant where the proposed rendering plant is concerned. She said the underlying issues with current capacity at the plant remain.

Overton said she believed detailed information provided to ADEM from Coosa Riverkeeper, and experts it sought out for input, played a role in this decision — along with the public pressure exerted in opposition to the plant.

Overton said the exchanges did not spell out a "no" to the project. She said she believed information from Coosa Riverkeeper and the Center for Biological Diversity about the existing

issues with the daily maximum load going into Neely Henry Lake from the water treatment plant, and the additional load the rendering plant would bring to the facility has been noted.

She said details of the letter — references to the uncertainty project's timeline, and the lack of approvals for the plant — should be noted.