
SCHUYLKILL HEADWATERS

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Of Fly Ash, Biosolids and River Dredge

There has been quite a bit of local environmental activity going on these past months. Hardly a day goes by that there isn't something in the Pottsville Republican relative to the situation at the Lehigh Coal & Navigation Company's Springdale Pit outside of Tamaqua.

Pa. DEP Secretary Kathleen A. McGinty announced on March 2nd that DEP had approved the general permit allowing LC&N to fill the Springdale Pit using river dredge sediment, fly ash, and lime and cement kiln dust.

The permit requires that groundwater monitoring be conducted at the storage site prior to being used and after placement within the pit. It also requires that the material be tested prior to being shipped from the original collection site.

Previously, on February 24th, Secretary McGinty announced the final report on the Bark Camp Project that took place in Clearfield County. This project was started in 1995 and utilized river dredge, fly ash and kiln dust to be mixed to form an engineered fill that would not allow rainwater to permeate it and thereby prevent the water from mixing with pyrite and forming AMD. Some of this dredge material came from the Hudson River in New York.

After eight years of filling, two dangerous highwall stripping pits from past mining have been restored to grade and are now utilized by wildlife and man. In the past, this site polluted approximately 180,000 gallons of water daily with AMD. By filling the pit, the water has been returned to the surface and is no longer entering the minepool. Trout are beginning to return to the watershed as other aquatic life is being restored.

The Bark Camp Project was a high visibility project from its inception. Penn State University, Columbia University and the Environmental Sciences Department at the State University of New York, and a host of other scientific professionals and local associations were involved in monitoring each step of the project.

After more than 100,000 analyses conducted over 5 years, there were no significant organic or metal contaminants detected other than those associated with AMD. There was a brief period when elevated sodium chloride (salt) was detected, but those levels were within acceptable standards. It was also discovered that municipal waste incinerator ash when mixed with fly ash and kiln dust resulted in higher amounts of chloride. For that reason, DEP decided that incinerator ash should not be used.

In making these recent announcements, Secretary McGinty made the following statement: "DEP has more than 20 years in mine reclamation expertise. Our policies and procedures in this regard are the best in the nation and a model for federal rules and policies. Most recently, DEP partnered with other private and nongovernmental entities to study the use of dredged materials in mine reclamation at the Bark Camp Demonstration Site in Clearfield County and the Tamaqua Demonstration Site near the Springdale Pit. The results are conclusive and positive: When used appropriately, this material is an extraordinarily valuable and effective tool in mine reclamation and in the remediation of acidic drainage from abandoned mines that pollute more than 2,000 miles of stream throughout the Commonwealth."

There have been several letters to the editor written by various ARIPPA members published in the Pottsville Republican expressing their point of view on the fly ash issue. Millions of dollars have been invested in these local cogeneration facilities that burn the coal waste that scars our landscape. The by-product of this process is steam and fly ash. The steam is used to turn generators that produce electricity and in some instances for heating (prisons, greenhouses, etc.). The fly ash has been used for filling stripping pits for two decades. It enables the land to be reforested and helps reduce surface water runoff and infiltration of surface water into minepools. Reclaimed mine land is far better than the mountains of culm material that covers our landscape.

Whether it be fly ash, biosolids or river dredge material, we have a few people that are opposed to using any of this material as a fill or cover for our abandoned mine lands. No matter how much testing and monitoring has been done over the decades of successful disposal of this material, they don't seem to be satisfied with these results. Delay tactics, moratoriums and other road blocks are thrown up that only confuse and breed fear in local citizens.

It is time that we move forward. It is time that we have faith and trust in those agencies who review these processes and tell us that they are safe as long as we follow scientifically proven guidelines. We have enough experience to establish checks to prevent unsafe practices from occurring.

Whether it be fly ash, biosolids or river dredge, it has to go someplace. We have the ability and expertise to dispose of these materials in a practical and economical manner. Filling stripping pits to prevent swimmers from drowning, or off-road vehicles and hunters from serious injury or death seems to be a more pressing need. If we are not allowed to utilize these materials in a safe, disciplined and responsible manner, then the very real dangers of highwalls, swimming holes and AMD will never be corrected nor will the unnecessary loss of life that we see each year.

I sometimes think that the “real” issues or objections to some of these projects is the concern over decreased land values or nuisance factors such as noise, traffic and dirt. If those are the real concerns, then maybe we should find a better way of addressing those concerns.

There is an old saying: “Everything flows downhill”. For years, we in Schuylkill County have been quite content to allow our sewerage, our sedimentation, our AMD to flow downstream via the Schuylkill River and other waterways. Isn't it somewhat hypocritical of us to prevent the correction of a situation that started with us? Isn't it time for all of us in the Schuylkill Watershed to work together to improve our environment so that we all can enjoy it as God intended for us to do?

-- Dave Derbes, Newsletter Editor, Schuylkill Headwaters Association, Inc.