

Cottage Grove Officials Burning Over 3M Plans

What appear to be minor violations at 3M's garbage burner fueled debate over plans to take on more waste.

By Jim Anderson *Star Tribune* **March 7, 2010**

Possible violations at the 3M Co. industrial garbage incinerator in Cottage Grove appear to be minor but have added to the tension between the company and the city over the incinerator's future. The Minnesota Pollution Control Agency (MPCA) is investigating violations that turned up in a 2008 audit, said agency spokesman Ralph Pribble. Because the investigation is still open, by law details cannot be divulged, but they were related to record-keeping and other administrative rules that have no impact on the environment or public health, he said.

"It is typical of any large facility with a permit to handle large volumes of hazardous waste," Pribble said. Overall, the incinerator has had a good compliance record since it began operating 40 years ago, but the agency is closely monitoring compliance with regulations. Vickie Batroot, site director of 3M's Cottage Grove plant, said the violations were promptly corrected. "We take these types of things very seriously," she said. "That's why we corrected them immediately."

But the city and the company have been engaged in an intense debate for the past year on a plan by 3M to take on garbage from other sources. Mayor Myron Bailey met with the city's attorneys last month, hoping the alleged violations might give the city some leverage to reopen a conditional-use permit the city issued for the incinerator in 1970. The conclusion: "It would be extremely difficult, if not impossible," he said.

Bailey has been trying to persuade the company to agree to reopen the permit process and redefine conditions the city set for the incinerator's operation. The company has refused.

The MPCA's permit for the incinerator allows 3M to burn only its own waste there. Because the company has been reducing its waste, it has had to supplement burning garbage with natural gas or fuel oil to keep the incinerator at its operating temperature. 3M wants to take on waste from sources beyond the company as a way to save money, about \$2 million a year.

The main concern by city officials and many Cottage Grove residents is the unknown risk posed by what is contained in garbage not generated by 3M. There is also fear the door will be opened for 3M to make burning garbage a commercial enterprise, which company officials have repeatedly denied. Bailey said he was disappointed 3M did not disclose the alleged violations, even if they were minor. For now, Bailey said, the city will focus its efforts on trying to lobby the MPCA as it makes its permit decision.

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