



## (Toxic) Fuel to the Fire

### Holcim Cement kilns continue assault on environment

By Ted Sylvester

Despite pleas from opponents, the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality is expected this fall to grant a permit to Holcim Cement Plant, in Dundee, Mich., to burn over 80 additional waste materials in its cement-making process. Local residents and environmentalists argue that the Dundee plant is already the state's 6th largest polluter and that permission to burn even more waste materials in its two cement kilns would create an even more toxic brew of air emissions.

Holcim originally applied for the permit on Nov. 19, 2001. Their kilns currently burn coal, rubber tires (500,000 in 2002), petroleum coke, small quantities of silica gel, diesel fuel, bottom ash from area power plants, and used oil from the site. The Ecology Center and Citizens Against Polluting the Environment (CAPE) contend that even though none of the additional materials are regulated as hazardous, some contain toxic contaminants that when burned will increase emissions of dioxins and other air toxins like lead and mercury.

"The problem is," says Ecology Center project director Jeff Gearhart, "we just don't know how dangerous it will be without proper testing." Gearhart points out that when Holcim recently went through a three-year permit process to add scrap tires to their list of fuels, at least the DEQ ordered air emission tests before that permit was granted.

#### Holcim's lousy track record

Holcim Dundee, in Monroe County, is one of 11 cement kilns in the U.S. owned by the Swiss-based Holcim Limited, operators of 70 cement plants worldwide. The facility produces 1.1 million tons per year of cement and

emits 2.6 million pounds per year of pollutants. It is the number one emitter of VOCs (volatile organic compounds) among the nation's cement plants, and in 1999-2000 was fined \$500,000 for 17 years of air emissions violations.

The Ecology Center, CAPE, and other concerned residents have been lobbying Holcim Dundee to pay attention to their concerns for years. Most of the work has centered around Holcim's air pollution but other problems include: the disruption of peace and quiet and possible structural damage to nearby homes from blasting in the quarry; the noise and congestion from hundreds of trucks a day on local roads; and the depletion of local aquifers and surrounding streams due to Holcim's large water withdrawals. The latest strategy includes ongoing Saturday picketing at the plant by CAPE members and others.

#### Garbage in – garbage out

For its part, Holcim says diverting waste products from landfills and incinerators and burning it in their kilns demonstrates their commitment to environmental sustainability. They also admit that it saves the company money on fuel costs.

"Holcim is more interested in increasing profits by burning toxic waste than it is in truly improving the plant's environmental performance," says Gearhart. If they really want to help the environment, he explained, they would quarry their limestone elsewhere. Limestone is the main ingredient needed to make cement and when it is heated in Holcim's kilns to 3000-degrees Fahrenheit, it is responsible for the great bulk of toxic emissions (volatile organic compounds) emanating from the plant.

The main problem is that the limestone quarry that Holcim's cement-making operation sits next to – and

depends on – is particularly "dirty," says Gearhart. The limestone in it contains large amounts of shale, which makes it oily and high in sulphur and mercury.

Another problem is that Holcim uses old technology – an obsolete and energy-intensive wet process – while 94% of European and Japanese plants have adopted dry and semi-dry processes. Dry processing not only saves more than 50% on fuels, it also reduces water usage, emissions of toxins and greenhouse gases.

Activists also estimate that Holcim's waste-burning plans could result in up to 600,000 tons per year of additional out-of-state waste materials flowing into Michigan. Gearhart says that "Holcim is dumping this waste into the great landfill in the sky."

#### The long term

Ideally, Holcim would acquire cleaner limestone off-site or relocate their operations next to a source of cleaner raw materials. Short of that the Ecology Center and CAPE call on Holcim to at least modernize their operations by converting the plant to a dry kiln process; implement energy conservation by using the kilns' hot exhaust gases to dry raw materials and generate electricity; and maintain the regenerative thermal oxidizer (RTO) to reduce the bulk of its permitted annual release of 7,200 tons of volatile organic compounds that contribute to ground-level ozone formation.

Regardless of the outcome of this permit skirmish, the battle by environmentalists and residents to make Holcim Dundee a responsible neighbor in the community will continue. For more information about CAPE and their activities, contact Christopher Lemon at (734) 368-0025.

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