Lincoln Journal Star, April 28, 2022

AltEn seeks new permit

Residents question plan to discharge plant wastewater

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Lincoln Journal Star

MEAD — Millions and millions of gallons of wastewater continue to be held in an open lagoon system at AltEn, where seed coated in pesticides was once processed into ethanol.

Beginning this month, under a pilot project approved by the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy, roughly 9 million gallons of treated wastewater has been applied to some 300 acres of farm ground in Saunders County.

But with the company's permit allowing it to move the treated wastewater off-site set to expire this summer, and with millions of gallons of pesticide-contaminated waste continuing to leach into the aquifer below, the window to act is closing.

On Wednesday, the state environmental department heard public comment on a proposed renewal of AltEn's permit under the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination System (NPEDS).

The permit, last granted July 1, 2017, has been used by the six seed industry giants — known collectively as the AltEn Facility Response Group — that have taken over responsibility for cleaning up the site one mile south of Mead in Saunders County.

"AltEn cannot discharge water from the site without an NPEDS permit," said Cay Ewoldt, NPEDS and state permits section supervisor at the state environmental department. "If renewed, the permit could continue to be used by third parties continuing remediation at the site."

Under the proposed terms of the permit, which would carry through to June 30, 2027, AltEn and the seed industry giants now in control of the site would be authorized to land-apply wastewater at sites approved by the state.

AltEn would also be required to conduct regular monitoring of groundwater at four sites, and submit samples to a lab to look for an expanded list of chemicals before discharging any water.

The proposed permit prohibits

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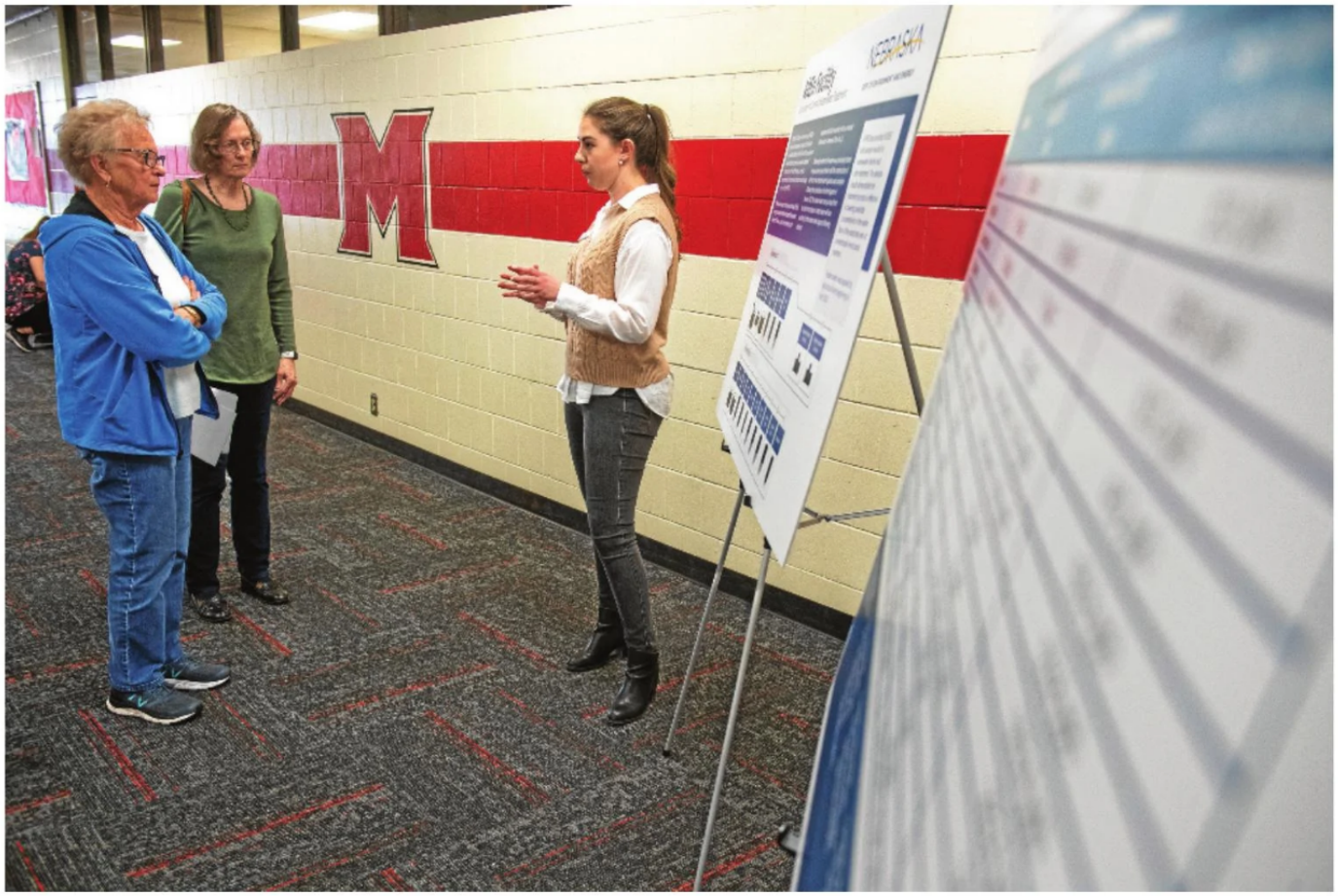

JUSTIN WAN, JOURNAL STAR

Hillary Stoll, an engineer with the Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy, talks with Judy McEvoy of Mead (from left) and Janece Mollhoff of Ashland before a public hearing on renewing AltEn's wastewater treatment permit Wednesday.

AltEn

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direct discharge of any water that has — or hasn't — come into contact with pesticide-contaminated waste, and bans AltEn from discharging water that flows through ditches off-site.

Ewoldt said the permit could be revoked if any discharge of wastewater was found to negatively impact surface water or groundwater in the area.

"We think these proposed changes in the permit will adequately protect the waters of the state," Ewoldt said.

Those who spoke at Wednesday's meeting, held in the gym at Mead High School, were skeptical that AltEn could fulfill the requirements outlined in the permit, or that the treated wastewater was safe to land-apply.

Jim Boucher, a retired engineer from Valley, said AltEn was previously land-applying wastewater loaded with clothianidin — a neonicotinoid pesticide found in the ethanol plant's solid and liquid byproducts — far in excess of the manufacturer's recommendation.

"I don't think you have the controls in this current permit to prevent the same thing from happening again," Boucher told the hearing officer.

Speaking on behalf of the Perivallon Group, which has scrutinized the cleanup efforts and provided support to the community, Janece Mollhoff of Ashland said she didn't believe AltEn could fulfill its obligations.

Nor does AltEn have the financial resources necessary to adhere to the conditions of the permit, she added.

AltEn is being sued by the state of Nebraska in Saunders County District Court for failing to abide by environmental regulations, and was recently sued in federal court by the six companies that once supplied it with seed.

Both lawsuits remain open.

"The LLC is habitually delinquent on taxes, is currently being foreclosed upon for tax certificates sold on one of AltEn's parcels, has not paid utilities nor met other financial obligations," Mollhoff said.

Mollhoff suggested the AltEn Facility Response Group — Bayer, Syngenta, Corteva, AgReliant, Beck's Superior Hybrids and WinField Solutions — be added as a responsible party to the permit.

"Otherwise, the permit means nothing because it requires something from a company that will not and cannot comply," she said.

John Schalles, a biology professor at Creighton University who is part of the research team studying the plant's effects on residents and the environment, said the permit "raised as many questions as it answered."

Schalles said the AltEn Facility Response Group was doing the best with "a bad deck of cards," but said he was concerned the pesticides would continue to spread until they were dealt with properly.

"There's no way to protect especially groundwater until that's done," Schalles said.

He echoed David Corbin of the Nebraska Sierra Club, who said he had "serious concerns" about reissuing AltEn's permit.

"Never before have this many insecticides and fungicides from so many different companies been accumulated in such large quantities in one place," said Corbin, a professor emeritus of health education and public health at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

Corbin said the permit renewal should be put off until the interaction between the chemicals and their degradation products with each other, the environment, and plants, animals and humans was better understood.

"This would help determine a more complete list of chemicals that should be tested for before any land application," he added.

One person submitted

The Department of Environment and Energy did not take any action on the proposed permit Wednesday. Director Jim Macy will ultimately be responsible for approving the plan, ordering changes, or rejecting it.

The hearing — the first held by the department since AltEn shut down in February 2021 — comes as regulators continue to wrestle with chemical runoff from the plant.

The levels in one of the damaged lagoons have inexplicably dropped more than 5 feet since last fall, the department said on its website, indicating the water may be leaching into the aquifer below.

Groundwater samples taken from monitoring wells dug in a circle around the lagoon system to a depth of 50 feet have detected high concentrations of many of the same pesticides found elsewhere on AltEn's campus.

One well, located on the south berm of the lagoon, showed the presence of the fungicide mefenoxam (2,700 parts-per-billion), as well as the insecticides thiamethoxam (2,000 ppb) and chlorantraniliprole (960 ppb).

Judy Wu-Smart, an entomologist at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln who leads the Bee Lab at the nearby Eastern Nebraska Research and Extension Center, said the concentrations "are not

testimony supporting the permit application.

Duane Johnson, who owns and farms several fields near AltEn where filtered wastewater from the plant was applied, supported renewing the permit.

"The water is a good source of nutrients," he wrote in an email to the department. "There were a series of required steps and approvals to qualify my fields and determine the allowed rate of water application.

"Controlled land application of tested, carbon-filtered water onto farmland is a good way to deal with the water from the AltEn site," he added.

Joel Schrader, the last person to speak at the public hearing, questioned if renewing AltEn's permit was the only plan available.

"Is that the objective, to get rid of it as quickly as possible?" Schrader asked. "Or to get rid of it the best way?

"It seems like we're pushing forward with one solution, whether that's the best one or not," he added.

yet at the threshold of acute toxicity in mammals."

But, she added, "may pose lethal risk for aquatic invertebrates and beneficial insects, especially in combination."

Water in Saunders County generally flows from northwest to southeast. Wells on the north side of the lagoons did not show the presence of any chemicals, meaning the water is traveling away from Mead and its water sources.

Pesticides have been detected in groundwater wells located downgradient — or downstream — of AltEn, however.

Last summer, a test of a UNL well showed the presence of clothianidin, and a drinking water well on Stan and Evelyn Keiser's property six miles downstream also showed trace amounts of clothianidin, thiamethoxam and mefenoxam.

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