

Sand Mines Place “Communities at Risk”

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Senator Kathleen Vinehout writes about the findings of two recently released studies regarding frac sand mining.

EAU CLAIRE - “What new information do we have about the mines?” the Eau Claire reporter asked me.

The reporter was referring to two sand mine studies recently released; one by a committee under the charge of the Trempealeau County Board and the other by the Boston Action Research group of the Civil Society Institute.

Communities at Risk, the Boston study, details sand mining activities across the Midwest. Western Wisconsin is the epicenter of the explosion of mines. The study mentions familiar concerns about frac mining including water and air quality and financial issues and adds new details on data and possible legislative remedies.

A Final Report on the Public Health Impacts of Non-metallic Industrial Sand Mining in Trempealeau County is a comprehensive overview of possible health effects. The committee made 59 recommendations including minimizing light and noise pollution; keeping communities stable; and protecting air, ground and surface water.

Recommendations were developed with the support of data collected from residents. For example, almost 90% of residents wanted protection of water. The “most important” two strategies were Protecting Drinking Water and Protecting the Environment.

The Trempealeau report detailed problems with water affecting both residents and other industries. Residents reported changes to the taste of water following mine blasting; one neighbor had a well replaced by the mine because of damage; the Gold’n Plump chicken processing plant cleaned very fine sand from water and spent several thousand dollars on sand separators and specialized screens to minimize sand in the water. The company wonders whether they need to drill a new well.

Also newly reported, Communities at Risk included new details from Wisconsin DNR data showing “highly damaging water pollution” in the form of heavy metals in sand wash ponds adjacent to mines. Heavy metals entering surface water can be a problem with iron ore mining but, to my knowledge, was never previously identified with sand mining.

Both studies expressed concern about the effects of contaminated water and air on human health. The Trempealeau Committee recommended ongoing water monitoring for several years after the mine closes. Air monitoring should be conducted for dust particles at the mine and in residential sites near the mine.

Monitoring should begin on the smallest and most dangerous of dust particles – those smaller than 2.5 microns. The Boston study reported Wisconsin does not now require monitoring on these particles.

Because exposure to dust can cause disease many years later, the Boston study recommends local and state officials conduct baseline health studies now and continue for many years into the future.

And what about all those jobs created by the mine? Both reports discuss economic impacts of mines.

The Trempealeau report detailed job creation at two mines; one had 30 full-time employees and three part-time office workers, all lived within an hour of the mine. The other mine, still under construction, had 5 full-time operators who were all from outside the region. They expected to hire 25 employees once under full operation.

The Boston report examined a study on the costs and benefits of mining. The study expressed concern about the mines effect on other industries including tourism, writing “frac sand mining jobs would continue to be a miniscule fraction of all jobs in the counties with frac sand resources, suggesting that, in many cases, the risks far outweigh any benefits”.

What can the state do to assist communities grappling with the impacts of mining? Wisconsin needs more inspectors to monitor compliance with existing laws. The two positions approved in the last budget are not nearly adequate.

Trempealeau County is right to monitor small and large particles. Let’s use the state’s resources to assist local counties. We don’t have to look far to find out how this can be accomplished.

The Minnesota Legislature directed it’s DNR to create a guidance document for local government stating what and how to regulate the mines and how to protect water quality and public health; new air standards for silica dust are in the works. And Minnesota funds a “Bluffland Landscape Coordinator” who assists local government in drafting ordinances to protect the blufflands.

These are good ideas to help struggling communities at risk.

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Below you will find links to those studies. Kathleen includes recommendations for legislative action to assist communities and counties affected by sand mines. http://www.thewheelerreport.com/wheeler_docs/files/0925csi.pdf
<http://www.trempeleaucounty.com/landmanagement/nmm/documents/PublicHealthImpactsofNMISMinTrempeleauCounty.pdf>

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