

Red Deer Advocate

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Farm air quality disputed

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Some Central Albertans are demanding the Natural Resources Conservation Board correct errors in a report that clears a massive hog farm of wrongdoing.

Environmentalist Martha Kostuch said the NRCB report contains factual errors and wrongly dismisses data pointing to harmful emissions from the Bacon Acres farm near Bentley.

"The people affected by Bacon Acres deserve better. They are not being served well by the NRCB," said Kostuch, a member of the Clean Air Strategic Alliance, which works to resolve air quality issues.

Kostuch said the NRCB and the law it enforces, the Agricultural Operation Practices Act, do not protect air quality.

Bacon Acres is releasing enough hydrogen sulphide to make people ill, said Kostuch. But the NRCB inspection report released last week states Bacon Acres is operating within the law. The Parkland Airshed Management Zone (PAMZ) found levels of hydrogen sulphide near Bacon Acres exceeded provincial guidelines for 25 hours during testing last May and June. The NRCB report said those findings were inconclusive because the high levels occurred when wind blew from various directions. The wind didn't blow from the direction of Bacon Acres for about half of the 25 hours, according to a consultant who studied the PAMZ results for the NRCB.

But Kostuch said the wind came from the direction of Bacon Acres in all but three of the hours. Kostuch said the consultant didn't bother to contact PAMZ. Kostuch is a member of the PAMZ board, but said she wasn't speaking on its behalf.

To confuse matters, said Kostuch, the NRCB report stated the provincial hourly guideline for hydrogen sulphide is 30 parts per billion (ppb) when the correct figure is 10 ppb.

The report indicates health would be affected only if hydrogen sulphide levels far exceeded the guideline.

But Kostuch said recent scientific findings suggest health is affected at levels below 10 ppb. Hydrogen sulphide levels reached a high of 106 ppb near Bacon Acres, according to PAMZ.

"If the oil and gas industry were exceeding the guideline and were not doing anything to correct it they would be shut down."

The NRCB investigated the odour from Bacon Acres after receiving 84 complaints in the first six months of 2002. Bacon Acres is a 2,300-sow farrow-to-finish operation one km south of Bentley.

Alex Bolton, NRCB head of compliance and enforcement, admitted an error was made in printing the hydrogen sulphide guideline in the main part of the report. The consultant's letter, contained at the back of the report, has the correct figure.

The number doesn't change the substance of the report, he said.

Bolton said the Agricultural Operation Practices Act does not set out air quality standards, but the NRCB has jurisdiction to deal with nuisances.

“We are not disputing the fact there is odour coming from Bacon Acres,” said Bolton, adding the concerns are being taken seriously.

At the NRCB’s request, the Alberta Farmers’ Advocate is assembling a review committee to look at Bacon Acres.

Alberta Environment has jurisdiction over enforcing environmental laws. Spokeswoman Kim Hunt said the department is working with the NRCB on the issue. But it won’t take action against Bacon Acres because it doesn’t want to duplicate the NRCB’s efforts.

Darlene Goehring, a former Bentley councillor, is one of the town residents who is upset. She said the government tries to appease people by looking into their concerns. But it doesn’t follow through with action.

In 2001, the government promised \$250,000 for Bacon Acres to minimize odours. Bacon Acres received \$25,000 to \$30,000 for odour-reducing biofilters, which are not being maintained.

“They do studies and blow smoke up our ass to appease the public, said Goehring.