

Sulfur oxide emissions in Davenport

Residents say pollutants are dangerous

By PAUL BEATTY
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DAVENPORT — From 1906 to the end of the 1960s, whenever a dusty car drove through Santa Cruz with only its windows clear where the wipers had swashed back and forth, it was known the car and its passengers came from the little cement town of Davenport, ten miles up the coast.

For 65 years, Davenport lay under a covering of cement dust. It was a town without color where no flowers grew. Well, there were a few gray flowers among the tough mountain brush.

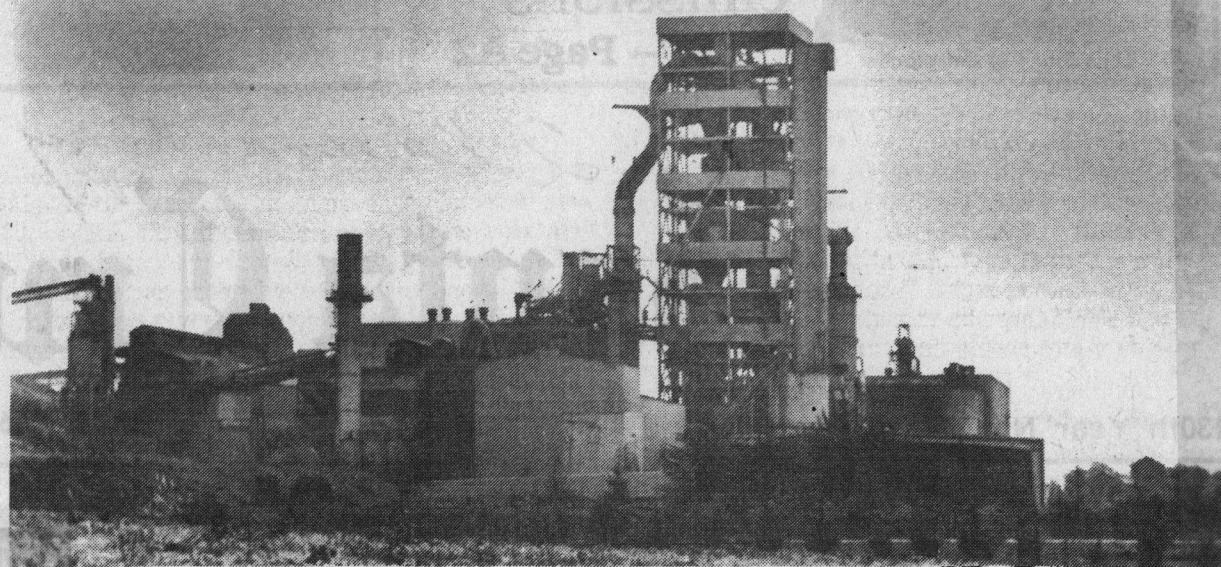
The spewing cloud of cement dust, oxides of nitrogen and other pollutants, was visible for miles; especially heavy from the mid-1900s until the 1920s when 24 kilns were running.

The area was a natural for the plant, at the seaside edge of hills of lime and shale that when baked forms the glue that plasters urban America together.

In the 1960s, the plant was called to account by environmentalists who had renewed America's love affair with its land.

The owners, the Pacific Cement and Aggregates Company, a subsidiary of Lone Star Industries, cut a deal with the young air pollution control board, a state agency to keep California's air as breathable and as invisible as possible.

The 1971 deal was meant to end forever the emissions of visible dust from the plant.



Pete Amos/Sentinel

Emissions of sulfur dioxide pollutants from Lone Star cement plant concern residents.

It worked, give or take a particle or two.

A further plant improvement — looking at it from both the environmental and economic sides — began in 1978 when Lone Star got a building permit from the Monterey Bay Unified Air Pollution Control board.

Ironically, the permit allowed the company to switch from oil and natural gas to coal. It was a move designed to keep the company competitive and save America's energy supply at a time when the oil cartels of the Middle East were putting the screws to the world.

Lone Star agreed to cut its oxides of nitrogen back to 182 pounds per hour, a decrease in those oxides of 550 tons a year that had been wafting into the coastal atmosphere.

The company's \$72 million reconstruction was completed in 1981 and it doubled its output of cement and everyone waited to see the results.

There was a cutback in oxides of nitrogen, but not within the 182 pounds per hour limit. The company was emitting from 200 to 500 pounds per hour.

And, surprisingly, it began emitting sulfur dioxide, a pollutant that cement plants aren't supposed to spew into the air.

Sulfur dioxide not only belches from the plant now and then at a rate of from 350 to 600 pounds per hour, the very fact that it is escaping the plant is a source of great embarrassment to Air Pollution Control Officer Larry Odle.

At a meeting of the Air Pollution Control Board Jan. 24, Odle reported, "In light of the belief that 90-95 percent of the sulfur would be absorbed in the process materials, the district did not consider the emission limits of the sulfur dioxide to be an issue and the corresponding emission limits of the evaluation were not specifically included on the Authority to Construct."

Board members, especially Dorteia Williams, a former resident of Davenport, expressed amazement that Odle and the technicians who designed the conversion of the cement plant had failed to know the plant would produce and emit sulfur dioxide.

More were amazed that Odle had set no limits back in 1978 when the construction permit was issued. The pollution was so obvious by 1983 that the board issued an abatement order against the company, telling it to clean up or go out of business by next month.

At the January meeting, Odle tried to explain that the coal and other fuels were not the material-of-origin of the sulfur dioxide but unexpectedly sulfur was being released from the shale as it cooked in the new kilns.

He said the company had done everything it could to control the emissions of oxides of nitrogen and sulfur dioxide and that it was time to issue an operating permit that would supersede the construction permit, along with an earlier variance and the order to clean up or close down.

Odle said the operating permit, which he has the authority to issue without board interference, will allow the company to increased limits for both the oxides of nitrogen and the sulfur dioxide.

Allowed will be 250 pounds per hour for the oxides of nitrogen with a top allowance of 350 pounds per hour for a two-hour average.

The plant will be allowed to emit 250 pounds per hour of sulfur dioxide with a maximum two-hour limit of 300 pounds.

Williams and other board members say they don't like it but apparently are accepting Odle's authority to issue the permit.

The only hold the board has on the situation is to decide whether it will uphold the abatement order for its final two weeks.

Lone Star's attorney Thomas O'Donnell from San Jose told the board that it doesn't even matter whether it ends the abatement order or not because Odle's operating permit will make it null and void.

O'Donnell was tough in his representation of the plant and went so far as to challenge Williams because she had made remarks about the plant when she was a resident of Davenport. She moved from there a year ago.

Williams was quoted in The Sentinel, "It's the fine particles that do the most damage to the lungs... the standards are low now and they (Lone Star) are even exceeding the standards, so the standards need to be tightened up."

O'Donnell said the statements were enough to have Williams disqualified from voting on the termination of the abatement order.

The board said it was up to Williams and she said she wouldn't step down. She promised Lone Star it would get a fair hearing from her.

Many Davenport residents today say the increased emissions are depreciating the quality of life in Davenport.

Judith Hutchinson said the emission rate is dangerous to the health of her family and neighbors, that oxides of nitrogen and sulfur dioxide are a threat to the circulatory and respiratory systems.

At the January hearing, she cited a number of medical authorities in support of her concern.

Hutchinson also said the plant continues to produce dust particles and told the media they cover her solar collector panels on the house and they have to be cleaned with muriatic acid. "Anything less than the cleanest possible air is not acceptable," she told the board.

Davenport resident Brenda Bailey said that Odle had told residents at a town meeting in Davenport Jan. 20 that "the decision was already made."

She accused Odle and his staff of "arguing so vehemently for Lone Star that I wonder who they work for."



Pete Amos/Sentinel

Davenport resident Judith Hutchinson says particles from Lone Star plant dirties her solar collector panels.

Other residents said they felt that Odle and his staff were biased for the company.

Odle said that even with the new standards, the company's emissions were well within those allowed by the state and federal governments.

He said the sulfur dioxide emission rate was only one-fourth of that allowed.

Davenport resident Bruce McDougal said the emissions are still at a rate of "1,010 tons — that's two million pounds — per year."

The company argues that even though it could not meet the standards of the construction permit, "there has been a substantial reduction of oxides of nitrogen (and sulfur dioxide) from the new plant as compared to the old plant."

An engineer at the plant stated that Lone Star's emissions are among the lowest of any cement plant in the world.

Neighbors say it is still too much of a bad thing.

Before Odle can issue his operating permit, he has to accept comments and letters from the public. The public comment period ends Feb. 14.

Odle has indicated that it's going to take new information — something he doesn't know — to change his mind on the issuance of the permit.

The air pollution board will hold what is expected to be the final hearing on the construction permit Feb. 21 at 1:30 p.m. at Watsonville City Hall.