Lone Star gets final operating permits

DAVENPORT — The Monterey Bay Unified Air Pollution Control District issued final operating permits to the Lone Star Cement Plant Thursday despite a history of protests by local citizens that emissions from the plant are unhealthy.

The action culminates almost ten years of controversy over the plant's pollution levels. Over the past five years more than 50 conditions have been placed on the facility's operation, including a placement of $545,000 in performance bonds and $25,000 in excess emission fees.

The issuance of the final permits followed certification of a 220 page environmental impact report that allowed for an increase in maximum total sulfur oxide emissions but also provided for reductions in nitrogen oxides and particulate emissions when compared to the plant's 1977 emission levels.

Ironically, the cement plant's problems came about originally when it began updating its equipment in 1978. In an effort to avoid using oil during that period of high oil costs, the company switched to coal as an energy source, with the Pollution Control District's approval.

One of the facility's goals was to lower its level of emitted nitrogen oxide, and the new equipment did that. Unfortunately, it also began emitting sulfur oxide at an alarming rate — 350 to 600 pounds per hour at times — an occurence unforseen by Air Pollution Control Officer Larry Odle.

The plant has operated for the past three years under an abatement order from the Air Pollution Control Board to clean up or close down. But Odle was able to override the Board's worries by issuing the operating permit based on an environmental impact report.

When Odle's power to override and his intention to do so was revealed at a Davenport town meeting last January, many residents were upset. But there was in effect nothing that they could do.

According to the Air Pollution Control District the 250 pounds per hour limit set of Sulfur Oxide emissions is still far lower than the Los Angeles limit of 1,160 pounds per hour.