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Modified permit will make UNC's Bingham Facility better, not bigger

By Bob Lowman

About 70 people attended a public hearing Wednesday night about UNC's request to modify its wastewater treatment permit for the Bingham Facility. Let me take this opportunity to explain our proposed modifications and to address concerns expressed at that meeting and in a Wednesday column by Preserve Rural Orange.

We are modifying our permit because of changes in our plans for the Bingham Facility, which houses animals important for life-saving research done on campus. We once had plans to expand the site, but the downturn in the economy and site limitations put a stop to those plans about two years ago.

Instead, we have decided to be better – but not bigger – at our Bingham Facility. We will remove the faulty wastewater treatment system – cited for two regulatory violations in 2010 – and get rid of it. We will refurbish the other wastewater treatment system on the site that wasn't cited.

Our permit will limit the amount of wastewater to be treated to just over 3,500 gallons per day. We don't expect to use this much on a daily basis because we have a new, more efficient cage washer and plan to maintain all of our animals on dry bedding disposed of offsite.

Wastewater at Bingham will be treated with chlorine and then held in a new clay-lined pond until it can be spray irrigated for the last stage of the treatment process, soil filtration. The clay-lined pond also meets the requirements for soil filtration.

To say that we are spraying "research waste" or "animal waste" on the site, as has been alleged, is inaccurate. Even in our previous violations, the treated wastewater that spilled from broken pipes or that leaked from the plastic-lined pond was only missing the soil filtration step. Untreated waste was not discharged into the creek or onto the ground in either incident. Using clay-lined ponds instead of plastic-lined ones and higher quality plumbing and spray heads assure that these incidents won't recur.

We will also increase the size of our spray fields to make sure we don't overload the capacity of the soil to absorb the spray irrigation. This is not an expansion of the treatment system, but a conservative approach based on careful analysis of the soils onsite. Spraying the same volume of water over a larger area provides greater operational flexibility and reduces environmental impacts.

The modified permit also requires two additional monitoring wells. In samples taken from our existing monitoring wells over the years, test results showed no pattern of contamination. We have tested our own drinking water well and the drinking water well at the former Lombardo property that adjoins ours and also found no concerns. Additional monitoring wells will provide even more assurance that our wastewater treatment is effective.

We are eager to get started on this project because, for the past 2½ years since we shut down the faulty system, wastewater from the site has been pumped and hauled from Bingham to the OWASA wastewater treatment facility. This has been a noisy and smelly process for us and our immediate neighbors. It's also very expensive. We estimate that refurbishment of the system will cost about \$900,000, much less than the cost of continuing pump and haul operations indefinitely.

We made some mistakes at Bingham, we're sorry for them, and we've learned from them. I hope this presentation of the facts has answered any questions or concerns the public has about UNC's operations there. More information is available on the website, <http://www.unc.edu/community/bingham.html> . You may also address your questions and concerns to me at Lowman@unc.edu or (919) 962-0656.

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