

Royal Oak fined for violations

BY CHRISTOPHER CURRY
STAR-BANNER

OCALA - The Florida Department of Environmental Protection has fined Royal Oak Enterprises \$39,500 for permit violations observed last September at its former Ocala manufacturing plant.

In a consent order dated July 24, the DEP also required the Roswell-Ga. based charcoal giant to begin testing soil and groundwater samples for pollution. Royal Oak also will have to dredge a retention pond on the property and submit the residue collected for sampling and submit samples from a wood pile on the property for testing.

The company also will have to remove all storage stockpiles from the plant, 1921 N.W. 17th Place, within 90 days of the DEP order.

Royal Oak President James Allen signed off on the order on July 12.

On Monday night, the Marion County Health Department called a community meeting at Howard Academy to discuss the results of air pollution tests conducted near Royal Oak back in March, two weeks after the plant closed. Health Department and city of Ocala staff outnumbered residents seven to two at the meeting. The low turnout troubled Marion Environmental Health Director Tom Moore.

"There needs to be more than just you," Moore said. "There needs to be more than just us."

The test samples were collected on a vacant lot about a block from Royal Oak and inside four homes nearby. They were then sent to a New Jersey laboratory for testing and to a scientist at the Florida Department of Health for analysis. That scientist, Susan Ann Skye, concluded the tests showed no threat of air pollution.

"There's no lingering after effects from Royal Oak at this point," Moore said of her findings.

Skye did note that a lab would normally not test the samples from the four home sites because the vacuum cannisters used to collect them did not have sufficient negative air pressure to get a full sample.

"It still identified any problems that could have arisen, but some of them could have been diluted," said Jim Padgett, an environmental specialist with the Health Department.

Skye was out of the office Monday and could not be reached for comment.

The Health Department and its Protocol for Assessing Community Excellence in Environmental Health (PACE-EH) program funded the tests to try to alleviate residents' concerns over pollution.

"We are appreciative that they did volunteer to do it," said Ruth Reed, president of Neighborhood Citizens of Northwest Ocala, also known as NCNWO. "We did not ask them to do it. They volunteered to do it."

But the residents group formed to combat industrial expansion in the area questioned the timing of the tests. In its June newsletter, NCNWO noted the tests occurred after Royal Oak had removed the smokestacks from the Ocala plant and that DEP would have had resources to conduct a wider array of tests. The city of Ocala and DEP had agreed to partner on air pollution testing in the area, but it did not happen before the plant closed.

The DEP consent order stemmed from an on-site visit last September. During the visit, inspectors discovered, among other things, the plant did not have the afterburners company

officials said were there to control emissions and that Royal Oak had under reported methanol output in its permit application to DEP. Inspectors on site "observed excess visible emissions" from the plant's south smokestack.