

Dumped ethanol byproduct could mean \$10,000 in fines

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PORTALES, N.M. - The discovery of dumped byproduct from a Portales ethanol plant near Melrose two weeks ago could cost High Plains Ethanol \$10,000 in fines - or more, depending on how many times it happened.

High Plains, based out of Wichita, Kan., admits that at least one incident of waste disposal occurred in a ditch two miles north of Highway 60/84 in mid-October.

The amount of the liquid byproduct of ethanol has been characterised by District Attorney investigator Allan Farkas as in the "thousands of gallons."

"Thousands of gallons could be appropriate, although I'm not sure of the exact number," said Chris Standlee, vice president and general counsel for High Plains.

"There will be some disciplinary action," added Standlee, referring to personnel in the Portales plant. "It's certainly not hazardous material. Ninety-five percent of it is water, the other 5 is mostly fermented starch from milo.

"It's certainly safe for ingestion, but we also admit a mistake was made in this one instance."

High Plains Ethanol, according to Standlee, employs more than 40 people in Portales and the facility annually purchases around \$14 million of grain from farmers within a 100-mile radius.

The purpose of the plant is to produce ethanol, an alcohol fermented from grain. In High Plains' case, the grain most used is milo.

"When this facility is operating correctly, there shouldn't be any wastewater they need to dispose of elsewhere," said Maura Hanning, program manager for the state's Groundwater Quality Bureau, part of the New Mexico Environment Department.

Hanning said that High Plains has a discharge permit with the bureau, but that permit does not cover byproducts discharged outside of the plant location.

"A fine of up to \$10,000 per day is possible for that violation. That's \$10,000 for every time they took wastewater out there," Hanning said. "We're still waiting for data from the state laboratory to determine at what level of severity we need to treat this."

Both Groundwater Quality Bureau officials and scientists with High Plains took samples of the discharge in order to have it analyzed. High Plains' investigation is expected to yield results of any possible danger in the material sometime in early November.

"That's my understanding. They took a separate set of samples," said Christina Kelso, environmental scientist with the state, who does not know when the groundwater bureau's labs will produce results.

Farkas, whose office is cooperating with the state Attorney General's Office and the Environment Department in an investigation, believes that more than one instance of dumping may have taken place.

"There may have been more than one," Farkas said. "Curiously enough, they (High Plains) came out and cleaned it up and convinced someone in Melrose to take what was left out to the landfill there."

At the heart of the investigation is the harm the byproduct, called "thin stillage" in this case, might have done to the water supply below.

"I'm not saying it happened this time, but there is a concern over chemicals reaching the aquifer," Farkas said. "They didn't have a permit to dump it in the county and that 5 percent contains some nitrates.

"Grown-ups can tolerate some nitrates in their water," Farkas added. "But pregnant mothers and older people cannot tolerate some levels of it."

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