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Radioactive Frack Waste Processed in Martins Ferry

July 12, 2015

By CASEY JUNKINS Staff Writer , The Intelligencer / Wheeling News-Register

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MARTINS FERRY - Employees of Pottstown, Pa.-based Austin Master Services are processing Marcellus and Utica shale fracking waste - some of which contains radioactive uranium, radium and plutonium - inside the former Wheeling-Pittsburgh Steel Corp. plant.

"When people hear the word 'radioactive,' they might think the employees are going to turn green. That's not going to happen," Martins Ferry Mayor Paul Riethmiller said. "The amount of that is very minimal. They have thorough safety plans in place."

According to forms sent from Austin Master Services to the Ohio Department of Natural Resources, as well as ODNR documents and Ohio Department of Health memoranda, the site is authorized to receive, store, process, treat and dispose of fracking waste. A manager at the site, officially known as the 4K Industrial Park, declined to give his name. However, he said the plant accepts both solid and liquid frack waste, including "drilling muds and production flow back water sludge."

Article Photos



Photo by Casey Junkins

"People are glad we are here because we are not only putting people to work - we are taking their problem and getting rid of it," the manager said.

This is a much different situation than GreenHunter Resources encountered when they planned a frack brine water recycling facility across the Ohio River in the Warwood section of Wheeling. There, the Wheeling Water Warriors fought to keep the proposed plant out of their neighborhood. Because the area alongside the Wheeling Heritage Trail is zoned for "residential use," this complicated GreenHunter's plans to barge the waste down the river.

"This is already an 'industrial zone,'" Riethmiller said of the area Austin calls home.

Company and City

Wheeling businessmen Quay Mull and Joseph N. Gompers purchased the once-thriving Martins Ferry steel mill for \$2 million out of RG Steel's bankruptcy in 2012. Since then, officials transformed the facility into the industrial park.

Riethmiller said Austin representatives met with city leaders several months ago regarding their project.

"They were very open about everything," he said. "We have trucks carrying all kinds of stuff through our city every day, anyway, on (Ohio 7)."

The Austin manager said the firm employs about 25 workers at the site, while paying them "better than average wages."

"We certainly plan on hiring more as our business grows. We are going to have plenty of work. We think this is a 30- to 40-year play," he said.

Permits/Risks

According to Austin's permit from the Ohio Department of Health, signed by Bureau of Radiation Protection Chief Michael Snee, the company may "receive, acquire, possess and transfer radioactive material ... " The materials specifically listed on the permit are plutonium, uranium and radium.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention indicates plutonium is most dangerous when inhaled.

"When plutonium particles are inhaled, they lodge in the lung tissue. The alpha particles can kill lung cells, which causes scarring of the lungs, leading to further lung disease and cancer," CDC information states.

"Uranium is also a toxic chemical, meaning that ingestion of uranium can cause kidney damage from its chemical properties much sooner than its radioactive properties would cause cancers of the bone or liver," the agency's website states.

However, both Martins Ferry and Austin officials emphasize any amounts of these materials will be small, while workers will exercise caution when handling such substances. The firm's website states its employees have demolished more than 75 facilities containing "hazardous and radioactive" materials since 1998.

Austin Operations

Company information submitted to ODNR states a maximum of 60 trucks daily will enter the site to load or unload material, although the manager said they are now only getting about two each day. Workers could process up to 100,000 tons of drilling and fracking waste per year, the forms show. As much as 20,000 tons of material can be stored on site for a period of 30 days, it adds.

The company shows it plans to keep the waste in containers as much as possible. Workers will stabilize the material with cement dust to reduce the amount of free material in the container.

Unlike GreenHunter, Austin officials have no plans to barge anything on the river. The employee said they will place the material onto railroad cars for shipment to Utah for disposal. The company believes it will dispatch a train once a week with up to five rail cars per shipment.

Any leftover liquid waste will go to one of the numerous injection wells scattered across the Ohio countryside.

"I don't like to keep the stuff on site," the Austin manager said. "We process it as quickly as we can."

The firm even established a contingency plan in the event of a "100-year flood" to ensure public safety. Workers would move all trucks, tanks and containers to an open area between the facility and Ohio 7 to prevent waste from entering the river during a flood event.

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