

There is a new role model for Cemex

Contributed by Susan de Castro McCann
Thursday, 15 March 2007

LYONS – “l’m really encouraged by what we saw happening at the cement plant in Charlevoix, Michigan,” said Jamie Rall, program director for C o l o r a d o C i t i z e n s Campaign, a n o n - p r o f i t group that p r e s s u r e s i n d u s t r i a l polluting corporations to get their emissions down to zero. CCC works on one polluter at a time in what they call the Good Neighbor Campaign.

Currently the CCC is working to get pollution down to zero at the Cemex plant in Lyons. To learn more about how well-run plants operate, Rall and two people from Ohio Citizens Action, which does the same work as CCC, went to Michigan to create a documentary on the St. Mary’s Cement Plant in Charlevoix. “We were studying Cemex plants across the country and we knew that there was a bad pollution problem at the Charlevoix plant, but that plant was now sold and we heard that this plant was now a model plant with state-of-the-art technology; so we wanted to see what they were doing to control emissions. The most surprising thing to me was the total transparency at St. Mary’s. They gave us interviews and documentation on their emissions. We were able to look at all their new equipment. We could only video outside the plant, but we got to sit in their control room and watch the screen showing their emissions, minute by minute.”

St. Mary’s, a privately owned family corporation headquartered in Brazil, purchased the Cemex cement plant in Charlevoix two years ago. When Cemex owned the Charlevoix plant the company was fined more than \$1.3 million by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and the State Department of Environmental Quality for failure to control and limit particulate matter (dust) emissions, perform the required compliance monitoring and follow various other state mandates.

“St. Mary’s bought the Charlevoix Cemex plant with the fines and penalties,” said Rall. “And right after they bought the plant they installed a brand new bag house for \$6 million. If you contrast this with the fact that the Lyons Cemex plant claimed several years ago that their bag house was operating at over 95 percent efficiency but the state inspectors found that there was no bag house in place, no equipment at all in the A-frame unit at the plant. They have a bag house operating now at the plant, but that is a big difference from the St. Mary’s plant. The bag house is an important piece of pollution control.”

Charlevoix Township Supervisor Dale Glass agrees that the difference between St. Mary’s and Cemex in Charlevoix is dramatic. “So far the difference is night and day,” said Glass, who after experiencing so many problems with Cemex, holds a healthy skepticism. “I always say, so far, because we have to wait and see what the future holds.

“The first thing that I noticed was that their whole attitude was cooperative toward fulfilling the requirements of our mining ordinance. I used to practically have to dynamite Cemex to get them to give us the required reports, but St. Mary’s was very friendly and cooperative. They call me and apologize if they are going to give me the reports a day late, but they are usually early and they give us so much information we can barely read it all.”

The St. Mary’s plant in Charlevoix sits on a point that juts out into Lake Michigan. The cement is shipped by ore boats to ports around the lake including Chicago, Detroit, Duluth, Milwaukee and other sites. Some of the cement is still

transported by trucks.

Glass said that St. Mary's immediately began implementing state-of-the-art technology as soon as it bought the plant. "We told the new plant managers that they had to build a large berm, they had to cut emissions, reduce noise and no contaminants could go into the lake," said Glass. "They began making upgrades to the plant immediately. They have devised a plan where they moisten the ground around the trucks and they can recapture all the cement dust. They encapsulate the dust from the kilns before it is buried. They reduced the noise by using a new type of explosive. It has to do with the way they place the holes and how they are staggered and the depth. They have cut the noise level way below our standards. We use little seismographs to measure the noise. I use to get calls all the time from people living near the plant saying that their house was shaking off its foundation. Now no one calls. They blast once a day at noon because of the weather and they tell everyone around that they are going to blast. If the weather is not right, they won't blast that day."

Rall said she is very encouraged that if this can be done at one plant, it can be done at another. "They don't even use a truck wash at St. Mary's," said Rall. "The question is, why is Cemex spilling dust in the first place? When the trucks are loaded at St. Mary's, the new equipment has a suction device built in which suctions all the dust out of the air while loading the trucks. And that equipment is not that expensive. It was great to see a plant really working to control pollution. Three days after St. Mary's took over the Cemex they met with the neighbors, the watch groups, county officials and they made lists of all the changes everyone wanted. Then they began to implement the changes. We interviewed about ten people for our documentary and we hope to have it completed and to show it in April."

As a measure of protection, St. Mary's was required to post a bond to clean up the plant. "They have posted with us a gazillion dollar bond, so if they leave we can take down the buildings and reclaim the land," said Glass. "We have the money to clean up the pollution if they leave. It costs them \$20,000 a year for them just to maintain the bond. I think it is a win-win situation for all of us."

There are just three questions we ask, Rall said: Can changes be made to a plant? Can the plant make the changes financially? Will the plant make the changes? "At the Cemex plant in Lyons the first two answers are yes; we just don't know what the answer to the third question is, will they make the changes?"

Cemex in Lyons has a permit to mine Dow Flats Quarry which expires in Dec. 31, 2021 or in 14 years. Plant Manager Steve Goodrich said that the year the permit expires coincides with the amount of rock left to quarry. He said it is believed that the plant will shut down at that time. St. Mary's in Charlevoix has at least 40 or 50 years that it can mine limestone at their quarry, according to Glass. St. Mary's mines about 1.42 million tons of cement per year and Cemex in Lyons produces about 600,000 tons of cement per year. In February 2004 the state fined Cemex in Lyons \$280,000 for failing to control dust from the Lyons plant. But the violations continued and on December 22, 2006 the state health department slapped a \$1.5 million fine on the plant citing air quality and dust violations at the Lyons plant between 2004 and 2006. This is the second highest air quality fine in Colorado history. The concern for residents in the Lyons area is whether the Cemex plant will send the money to upgrade a leaky old plant, which only has 14 more years of operation and only produces half of the cement of some of the larger plants, or whether they will consider it more economical to continue to pay the fines.

Jennifer Borgen, External Communications Manager at Cemex USA in Houston answered the question this way:

“Cemex has demonstrated an ongoing commitment to investing in improvements in and around the Lyons plant that have reduced dust and other emissions, as well as reduced noise. These improvements were undertaken before our recent settlement with the state, and are part of how we have listened, and responded to ideas from our neighbors in Lyons. Among the improvements at the plant, we have: Automated our truck wash to remove residual dust; Paved areas around the plant to reduce dust; Reduced the footprint of the plant to reduce the distance that raw materials must travel; Begun using air cannons to clean the tower instead of dynamite to reduce noise.”

Borgen went on to say, “To share these improvements with our neighbors, we hosted an open house last year so that families from throughout Lyons and the surrounding area could see our plant firsthand and not rely on thirdparty descriptions of how we are making improvements. In addition, we are working with the state on additional improvements that are directly responsive to concepts raised by the Lyons community – including Mayor Nick Angelo. We are hopeful that the state will approve projects that will have tangible and visible benefits right here in Lyons. The record is clear: there have been, and will continue to be improvements to the Lyons plant that are designed to better our operations and respond to the thoughts shared by our neighbors.”

“Fourteen year is a long time for a child growing up in this area,” said Jamie Rall, citing a study that CCC did of this area and finding that one out of three people who live near the plant suffer from respiratory problems. “There are many things that Cemex can do that will not cost them huge amounts of money and now we have a model plant to look at as an example.”