

New Landfills Needed for ND Oil Drilling Waste

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — The amount of chemically tainted soil and other drilling waste produced in western North Dakota's thriving oil patch has been growing so quickly that the special landfills where it's disposed are filling up and the state will soon need more of them, state health officials say.

Data obtained by The Associated Press show the amount of so-called oilfield special waste has increased nearly 5,100 percent over the past decade, to more than 512,000 tons last year.

The more than 1 billion pounds of oilfield waste produced this year is roughly weight of the sunflower harvest in North Dakota, which is the nation's top sunflower producer.

The growth of oilfield special waste "is just incredible," said Steve Tillotson, assistant director of the North Dakota Health Department's waste management division.

Trucks are hauling oilfield waste to facilities "24 hours a day, seven days a week," Tillotson said.

Oil companies increasingly are moving drilling waste off well sites, as more stringent regulations have been put in place, said Tillotson and Bruce Bogenrief, general manager of Sawyer Disposal Services, which runs an industrial waste landfill near Sawyer in north-central North Dakota.

"In the past, a lot of it was put on site," Bogenrief said. More "teeth in the regulations" has prompted companies to pay to haul the waste to approved facilities for environmental and liability reasons, he said.

"Tonnage-wise, it's going off the chart," Bogenrief said of the amount of oil waste being hauled to the special landfills.

Only five facilities in North Dakota are permitted to accept oilfield special waste, which includes chemically treated rock, soil and other solid material brought to the surface during oil well drilling. Tainted earth from oil spills also is shipped to the facilities that use massive clay- and plastic-lined pits to prohibit polluted material from leaking into water sources.

Existing oil waste disposal sites are nearing capacity and companies have been considering building more than a dozen similar facilities, said Scott Radig, the state Health Department's waste management director.

"None of the municipalities or counties have shown any interest," Radig said.

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"They're too busy keeping up with municipal-type garbage."

Indeed, refuse of all types is increasing in North Dakota with the rise in oil production and the resulting boom in population. State Health Department data show the amount of garbage at the Williston landfill in the heart of the oil patch increased from 27,500 tons in 2010 to 49,400 tons last year. In western North Dakota's McKenzie County, the amount of garbage dumped at the county-owned landfill more than doubled to 14,424 tons between 2010 and 2011, data show.

No formal plans have been submitted to regulators for review for new oilfield special waste facilities, although some are in the preliminary planning stages, regulators said.

In April, Stark County commissioners approved an oil waste facility in southwest North Dakota, despite a petition signed by about 200 people who opposed the project because of worries over truck traffic and possible harm to the environment.

The state Health Department, which must approve the project, has not received an application for the proposed facility.

Regulators also have approved expansions to existing facilities, and are taking public comments for a proposed expansion of a landfill southwest of Williston. Dishon Disposal Inc. wants to add an additional eight acres to the landfill site and build a pond for water runoff.

"Some of these are building expansions on expansions," Tillotson said.

The state Health Department expects to review at least three proposed projects over the next several months.

"I think the industry is going to need more," Tillotson said. "I'm glad we have them. Otherwise I don't know where all this would go."

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