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ABL: Smoke not a threat

Source was
boiler chimney

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ROCKET CITY, W.Va. — A black cloud of smoke that drifted from the Allegany Ballistics Laboratory toward Cresaptown two months ago came from the plant's boilers and did not involve the burning of rocket fuel or other toxic materials, plant officials said Wednesday night.

Addressing nearby residents and members of the citizens advisory board overseeing the cleanup of toxic waste at the plant, Leslie Mull, Sr., facilities manager at ABL, said the cloud was produced after workers blew out the smoke stack to remove residue from an oil-burning furnace. The cleaning process is performed regularly but a faulty valve contributed to the excessive smoke, he said.

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ABL smoke

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"We feel very certain that the particulate matter came from the oil burner," he said.

Mull said the malfunctioning valve has been replaced and steps will be taken in coming months to reduce emissions from the boiler.

Residents living in the Rawlings area across the Potomac River from the plant reported seeing the smoke and finding black soot around their homes in late November.

Given ABL's policy of burning rocket fuel, the residents thought the cloud had originated at the plant's "burning grounds."

Members of the advisory board then contacted plant officials, who determined that no burning occurred on the date in question. They were then able to trace the problem to the boiler.

Plant officials said prevailing winds carried the cloud toward Cresaptown but they could not determine how far the emissions carried or how many homes were affected.

Darrell Spence of the Allegany County Health Department said the residue residents found would have been largely comprised of carbon, like the soot a kerosene lamp leaves on glass.

"It's definitely not as serious" as the smoke from burning rocket fuel, he said.

Plant officials outlined several steps that will be taken to prevent the problem from recurring.

Mull said the oil burner's smokestack will be blown off every two hours instead of every four hours to reduce the amount of soot that is released. In addition, the boilers will undergo a \$500,000 upgrade that will include installation of monitoring devices to alert officials to excess emissions and keep a record of emissions levels.

Scrubbers will also be installed on the boilers, removing up to 70 percent of the pollutants in the emissions.

Mull said the upgrades go beyond current environmental regulations required by the state of West Virginia.

"We're not required to put scrubbers on but we feel we need to do it...," he said. "We feel this is going to make a big difference."

The upgrade project is expected to be complete by the end of the year.

Dr. Wayne Spiggle, who chairs the advisory board, applauded the steps being taken by plant officials.

"When it comes to positive community outreach, the idea of doing what is right before it's mandated, that is the goal we

want to achieve," he said.

Following the presentation on the boiler emissions, plant officials updated members of the advisory board about new policies in place for burning the rocket fuel and materials that are conta-

minated with the fuel.

ABL in the past burned not only the fuel but plastic molds, cloth rags and other materials used in the production process. While the fuel burns relatively cleanly, the plastics and other materials

would produce sooty black smoke that followed the wind to nearby residences.

Jim Fields, division manager for safety, environment and quality at ABL, said the plant now recycles plastics for further use

and disposes of rags and other items through certified waste haulers. Only the fuel is still burned on site.

"We have reduced significantly the amount of material we are burning," he said.