



Posted on Wed, Mar. 11, 2009

Deal prompts concerns over mega-landfill

Operator says no plan to expand despite option for adjoining land

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The operator of a mega-landfill that imports garbage to South Carolina has an option to buy adjacent property — prompting concerns from neighbors about an expansion of the Lee County site.

But Republic Services says it has no immediate plans to expand the 210-acre landfill. The site won't be full for about 20 years, said Jamie Amick, a regional executive with Republic in Greenville.

Amick said the company bought the three-year option in 2008 because the land was available. Amick said the company might also use the land as a buffer for the landfill — if it buys the property.

“That doesn't necessarily automatically mean expansion,” Amick said, declining to confirm a report that the option is for several hundred acres. “We do realize the buffer is an important component of being a good neighbor.”

Republic has not applied for an expansion permit with the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control, said Amick and DHEC spokesman Adam Myrick.

Even so, Myrick said the question may be raised during a public meeting DHEC will hold Thursday night in Lee County to discuss residents' concerns about landfill odors. The landfill, which towers over the flat land outside of Bishopville, has drawn increasing complaints about odors.

Shelley Robbins, who tracks landfill expansions for the environmental group Upstate Forever, said she can't imagine the company buying an option if it wasn't interested in expansion.

“If I were a company and land became available around me and I had that amount of time before expanding, I'd be buying up the land,” she said.

The growth of mega-landfills and out-of-state waste is an issue of increasing concern in South Carolina. Environmental and residents groups say the state needs a two-year moratorium on new or expanded landfills to stem the influx of trash from other states —and prevent more mega-landfills from opening.

The groups are backing a bill in the Legislature that would impose a temporary moratorium while tighter landfill rules are developed. A Senate hearing on the moratorium is scheduled Tuesday before a Senate committee in Columbia.

Records show South Carolina has far more capacity than it needs to bury trash generated by state residents. That makes the Palmetto State an attractive destination for the nation's garbage, critics say. At least two proposals have surfaced in recent years to build mega-landfills in eastern South Carolina that are comparable to the one in Lee County.

The Lee County site takes in more than 1 million tons of garbage, much of it by rail, from states along the East Coast, including New York, New Jersey and Massachusetts. The landfill is run by the Phoenix-based Republic Services, which merged with landfill operator Allied Waste late last year.

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