St. Marys: Pump tests didn't hurt area wells

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St. Marys Cement says a water-pumping test at the site of its proposed limestone quarry had no impact on groundwater off its property and no effect on drinking water wells in the area north of Carlisle.

Detailed results will go to the Ontario Environment Ministry for study prior to a proposed second round of testing the company wants to conduct this fall.

Friends of Rural Communities and the Environment (FORCE), a citizens group fighting the quarry plan, had urged the ministry not to issue a water-taking permit for the series of three tests, then tried to appeal to the Environmental Review Tribunal. The tribunal says it is powerless because the permit was issued for less than a year -- eight days less -- making it exempt from review.

In a statement noting the permit was the first significant regulatory decision made on the quarry application, FORCE chairperson Graham Flint said: "Given the tragic events of Walkerton, decisions about drinking water must be scrutinized to the highest degree. St. Marys and our government regulators, at all levels, need to know that our communities are prepared to use all legal means necessary to ensure that such scrutiny occurs in order to protect our drinking water and our rights."

St. Marys vice-president John Moroz told reporters yesterday: "I hear from the professionals that we're getting the information we need and also demonstrating we are not going to impact this community. We told the community we would safeguard them, and we had a system in place in case water was disrupted. We demonstrated we do what we say we'll do."

Engineering consultant Steve Hollingshead said the first test in July involved pumping 10 litres a second from one well for eight days while monitoring the effect on surrounding wells, Mountsberg Creek and other surface water, in order to better understand how ground water moves through the limestone formation St. Marys intends to quarry.

The information is needed to try to establish the feasibility of an untried system for pumping the deep pit dry and putting the water back into the ground to protect area wells, wetlands and streams. Hollingshead said the next phase would involve a low-volume test of the proposed recirculation system.

Flint said he worries the quarry dewatering design will rely on computer modelling based on small-scale tests that may not accurately reflect what will happen at full scale.

"I fear we are slipping into the mathematical-assessing generalization phase far too early," an argument he said he wanted to make to the review tribunal.

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