

Deadline looms in landfill overhaul

By MATT JOYCE
Of the Associated Press

CHEYENNE - At least 35 Wyoming municipal landfills are leaking contaminants into groundwater, according to a state Department of Environmental Quality preliminary finding that underscores Wyoming's long-term effort to overhaul its landfill system.

The 51 active landfills that make up Wyoming's 10 regional planning areas must submit their "integrated solid waste management plans" to the state Department of Environmental Quality by July 1.

The Legislature passed a law in 2006 requiring the 20-year management plans, including incentives for municipalities to work together toward the establishment of regional landfills. The law also set up testing of municipal solid waste landfills to determine whether they are releasing subsurface pollutants.

The Wyoming Solid Waste and Recycling Association approached the state about addressing the issue when it became apparent that some of Wyoming's landfills were leaking pollutants.

"We were concerned that, if it continued, the remediation costs were going to skyrocket and would just be a burden that cities couldn't undertake," said Myron Henry, secretary of the association and the retired former sanitation director for Powell.

Bob Doctor, a DEQ program manager for solid waste, said there are 146 known landfill sites in Wyoming, including 51 in operation. The department expects from 18 to 27 of those to close as a result of the regional planning process.

Doctor said groundwater testing set up by the 2006 law has found contaminant releases at landfill sites across the state. Those include 35 confirmed cases, 17 suspected cases and 75 landfills with incomplete data.

Doctor declined to name the specific landfills because the findings are preliminary and in some cases haven't been shared with local managers, who can object to the findings. The pollutants include chloride, nitrate and benzene, among others.

"We have 111 landfills that are less than a mile from a drinking water well," Doctor said. "This is really why we're here, this is why we're concerned and what we're trying to find out."

Doctor said the department's findings on groundwater testing will be compiled and submitted to the Legislature by a summer 2010 deadline.

"That information then will help us put together a report on the magnitude of the problem, what it might cost local governments to do remediation, and then kind of look at how in the world would they go about paying for that," Doctor said.

Along with the landfill monitoring, DEQ has also undertaken a multiyear effort to determine which active landfills need to install plastic liners to prevent leaking pollutants.

The department decided that 29 landfills are required to add liners for any expansion, four don't need liners, 12 are closing anyway and seven are still in question, Doctor said.

The expense of lining a landfill is forcing towns and cities to decide whether to maintain their own landfills or ship waste to a regional landfill. That's where the 20-year management plans come in.

Henry said it's often more cost-effective for a city to collect trash and haul it to a regional landfill than to maintain its own dump.

"If you don't follow the regional concept, you'll probably have to line your own landfill at your own

expense and you won't be sharing with other communities, which makes it very expensive, unless you're a large city," Heny said.

The Douglas City Council has decided to maintain its own landfill for now, rather than ship waste to Casper, said Les Newton, the city's public works director.

He said the city plans to build a facility to bail and bag its waste, a project that's expected to cost more than \$4 million. Then, Douglas plans to line the next section of its landfill, which wouldn't be needed until the end of 2013.

Newton said he understands the value of lining a landfill, but said it's a major expense for Douglas.

"We aren't alone; none of the communities have that kind of money sitting around," he said. "They're mandating we make this change, so great - how do we pay for it?"

Dave Andrews, chairman of the Glenrock Area Solid Waste Disposal District, said the Glenrock landfill plans to close within the next two months and start shipping its trash to the Casper landfill.

"The process of maintaining an open solid waste landfill, the cost of a liner for our volume, and so forth - it just makes more sense for us to participate with Casper and transport our waste there," he said. "It's just better economics all the way around."