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## Locals oppose new discharge permit for Valley Proteins

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Nov 19, 2021



Dozens of concerned locals came to testify at a Nov. 16 public hearing on issuing a renewed wastewater discharge facility in Linkwood.

PHOTO BY NATALIE JONES



LINKWOOD — A public hearing on re-issuing a permit to allow Valley Proteins to discharge wastewater into local waterways received strong opposition Tuesday night, with many local residents voicing concerns about water quality, strong odors, discharge volume and compliance with environmental standards.

Officials from the Maryland Department of the Environment hosted the hearing in Linkwood on Nov. 16 as a step of the state's wastewater permitting process, allowing the public to comment prior to formal issuance of a permit.

Valley Proteins is an industrial poultry rendering facility on Linkwood Road, just off U.S. Route 50 in Dorchester County. The plant receives poultry processing waste and processes it again into various components such as pet food. According to MDE, the facility processes approximately 20 million pounds of raw material per week.

The company recently submitted an application to renew the permit to discharge an average of 150,000 gallons of process wastewater and stormwater daily into Higgins Millpond and the Transquaking River, according to a document from MDE. Valley Proteins also requested expansion of their process wastewater flow up to a potential average of 575,000 gallons daily — nearly four times the currently allowed discharge volume.

The existing permit for Valley Proteins was issued in 2001 and expired in 2006, according to Rob Pudmericky, an engineer and project manager with MDE's wastewater permits program. The company submitted an additional application to renew its permit in 2014, but it has not been officially renewed.

Without a formal renewal, MDE has exercised administrative control to continue to let the plant operate on the expired permit for 15 years. Documents from MDE presented at the hearing state that wastewater discharge permits are required to be renewed every five years.



More than 30 individuals testified at the hearing, sharing their concerns and complaints about the prospective permit. Some comments focused on personal issues, while others addressed the broader environmental impact.

Multiple individuals residing in close proximity to Valley Proteins testified about the odor emanating from the plant — a smell so strong that locals don't want to open their windows in nicer weather and are unable to enjoy outdoor activities.

During a virtual hearing on the permit in October, the owner of the millpond near the plant reported two dogs belonging to his family died within 24 hours of swimming in and drinking water from the pond. Another resident with property bordering the pond reported seeing a large fish kill to MDE in July 2020, with no action reportedly taken by the agency, according to a statement on the Dorchester Citizens for Planned Growth website.

While Alan Girard, Eastern Shore director for the Chesapeake Bay Foundation, testified at the virtual MDE hearing in October, he brought up additional concerns at the Nov. 16 hearing. Girard pointed to Valley Proteins's chronic monitoring and reporting violations under the current permit. To make sure the facility is compliant, he suggested monitoring reports should be required to be submitted monthly rather than annually.

“We encourage MDE to issue a final permit with conditions that are protective of water quality, meet TMDL requirements and are fully enforced,” he added.

Paul Allen, a retired science teacher who taught for 17 years in Dorchester County, emphasized that diversity is the most important part of an ecosystem. He said the species diversity in the Transquaking River watershed was “formerly incredible,” but now the only things that thrive in the waters are invasive species. An increase in the amount of discharge from the plant won't help either the water quality or aquatic life.



“If you increase the volume (of wastewater discharge) by four times, there’s going to be a lot more stuff in the water,” Allen said.

Dorchester County resident Susan Olsen, a board member of Dorchester Citizens for Planned Growth, said the MDE proposal omitted the “concept of fairness” by allowing Valley Proteins the opportunity to expand its current wastewater discharge.

“What is the rationale for letting them expand?” she asked, pointing out the plant’s history of exceeding limits for nitrogen, phosphorus, fecal coliform and ammonia. “Why should a regulatory government body like MDE allow a fourfold expansion to an industry that has undoubtedly contributed great harm in this watershed?”

Citizens looking to provide additional comments must submit them by Wednesday, Dec. 15. Written comments must be postmarked on that day and directed to the Maryland Department of the Environment. Emailed or faxed comments on the permit must be received by 5 p.m. on Dec. 15. Emailed comments can be sent to [michael.richardson@maryland.gov](mailto:michael.richardson@maryland.gov).

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