

Burning Issue

Proposed tire furnace in Erie hopes to burn 90,000 tires per day. Guess who's 45 miles downwind?

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An application has been filed to build a massive tire-burning facility in the United States across Lake Erie from Norfolk and Haldimand counties.

The Ontario Ministry of Environment and Canadian environmentalists are closely watching the project, which is proposed for an industrial property in Erie, PA, 45 miles south of Port Dover.

The facility, if approved, would burn 90,000 scrap tires a day, according to an application filed with the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (PDEP). Boilers on site would generate 90 megawatts of electricity. Surplus steam would be sold to the community for heating purposes.

The company behind the project is Erie Renewable Energy LLC of Erie, Pennsylvania. The company is a division of Caletta Renewable Energy, which has renewable energy plants in Massachusetts, Maryland and Rhode Island.

"This is a long way from being approved one way or the other," MOE spokesperson John Steele said. "They have to show how they would meet the environmental standards of Pennsylvania. They would have to meet standards similar to our own."

MOE and federal regulators have standing agreements with the United States to consult each other on projects that impact common air sheds. Steele said provincial and federal regulators are engaged with their counterparts in Pennsylvania on the ERE proposal.

ERE hopes to build on 65 acres of the former International Paper site in Erie. In its application to the state environmental agency, ERE says it will burn 900 tons of shredded tires a day, with plans to operate around the clock 365 days a year. This would make it the largest tire-burning facility in the United States.

The proposal has provoked unease in Erie and amongst environmental groups on both sides of the border. However, in its application, ERE gives assurances that the technology is safe and environmentally friendly.

Key to the claim is the burning of shredded rubber on "circulating fluidized beds."

This process involves burning rubber in a format that allows it to be constantly churned with new supplies of oxygen. The result is more efficient combustion and fewer of the dirty emissions associated with burning tires in bonfires. Disposing of tires in this manner is common in Europe, where scrap rubber is regarded as a fossil fuel similar to coal.

The ERE application says secondary emissions will be treated with scrubbers, filters and catalytic converters before end gases are released through a 300-foot smokestack.

The project faces fierce opposition in part because, despite the emphasis on emissions reduction technology, the plant is expected to release eight tons of fine particulate matter every day. This translates into 2,920 tons a year. Numerous studies have identified fine particulates as an aggravating factor in respiratory and heart disease.

"Prevailing winds would carry much of the particulate matter into southern Ontario," Stephen Hazell, executive director of the Sierra Club of Canada, said in a letter last year to the Pennsylvania environmental agency. "These emissions would come at a time when Ontario is attempting to dramatically reduce emissions from its own coal-fired plants."

Erie residents themselves are resisting because the proposed site is close to elementary schools and residential neighbourhoods. They also fear the ERE plant will become a regional disposal site for scrap tires from the industrial northeast.

"Some of these pollutants are going to go right across the lake," Randy Barnes, president of Keep Erie's Environment Protected (KEEP), told The Reformer. "Your country has as much at stake in this as our country does."

Barnes added that PDEP has a reputation for ignoring public opposition to controversial developments. Barnes said the opposition in Erie is overwhelming. However, the community fears PDEP will dismiss this sentiment.

ERE needs several permits before it can proceed. It is seeking an emissions permit first because it is the most difficult to obtain. The PDEP review process, which includes public hearings, is expected to take a year.

"Unfortunately, we're really not making any public comments right now because our application is in the hands of the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection," ERE CEO Greg Rubino said this week. "Really, it's their matter to handle from here on in."

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