

JANUARY 25, 2017 11:48 AM

Mosaic rezoning request for additional phosphate mining merits approval

Bradenton Herald Editorial

This is a case where we hope people can agree to disagree with civility after both sides present their points. Manatee County commissioners confront another thorny environmental issue today as the Mosaic Co. and mining opponents stand before them.

The world's largest manufacturer of phosphate-based fertilizers seeks approval of a zoning change to allow a 3,635-acre expansion of its Wingate Mine property. Environmentalists object to the destruction of ecosystems and the additional toxic waste byproduct from fertilizer production, and some residents fear for their health and water quality.

The Winding Creek neighborhood sits adjacent to the Wingate East site. One of its residents, Linda C. Eneix of Myakka City, wrote county commissioners to express support for Mosaic's request: "As a member of the Manatee/Mosaic Citizens Advisory Panel, it has been my privilege to learn quite a bit about the Mosaic Company. As a resident of Winding Creek, which borders on their Wingate Mine, I have first-hand experience with this exemplary corporate neighbor. Mosaic Phosphates has impressed me as one of the most caring, responsive and community supportive institutions imaginable in today's commercial world. ...

"Mosaic is involved in everything — even to the point of sponsoring an annual weekend lunch meeting for their immediate neighbors, the Winding Creek residents, to personally address any concerns or questions."

Gary Reeder of Duette, a fourth-generation Manatee County tomato grower and president of the Manatee County Farm Bureau, wrote the Herald to say: "Myself

and other farmers understand that the agricultural economy throughout America and around the world relies on the valuable phosphate that comes from right here in our region. In addition to providing a critical resource for our crops, we appreciate what Mosaic does to support our agricultural community — from supporting 4H, FFA, county fairs and many other efforts that promote youth in farming, agricultural awareness and community involvement. Mosaic truly cares and is always ready to help in any way they can. ...

“Many of the former mined lands now house citrus and cattle operations, as well as abundant recreational areas. Anyone who argues against phosphate mining is also arguing against farmers, the jobs we create, and the abundant, affordable food we produce with the necessity of fertilizer.”

Betty Glassburn earned a high honor for her contributions to agriculture by being named the 2012 Manatee County Distinguished Citizen. She also wrote the Herald: “I was born and still live in Duette on the property that my family has owned for 134 years. ... At no time have I been afraid of the air I breath or the well water I drink.”

These distinguished, knowledgeable and civic-minded citizens present testimonials for Mosaic that should carry weight with commissioners. The company has proved over time to be a responsible and a good corporate citizen, and Mosaic’s generous community outreach demonstrates that.

The opposition is considerable, with the majority of hundreds of phone calls and more than 550 emails to commissioners before the meeting asking the board to reject the rezoning. Their concerns deserve to be addressed, including those about the potential damage to the headwaters of the Myakka River and other streams.

Two official decisions support Mosaic:

- Wingate East’s dredging and dragline operations would last about 13 years beginning in 2018. Then Mosaic plans 11 years of reclamation efforts to restore the land. The project would encompass roughly 940 acres of wetlands and about 23,400 linear feet of streams, Mosaic said. After land reclamation and restoration, the Army Corps of Engineers concluded in a 2013 Areawide Environmental Impact Statement that Wingate East and three other Mosaic mining projects would mostly have a “minor effect” that “would not be

significant” on ground and surface water resources, surface water quality and ecological resources.

The Army Corps of Engineers has yet to decide whether to grant a permit allowing mining on protected wetlands.

▪ In August, the Manatee County Planning Commission recommended commissioners approve Mosaic’s zoning-change request. Citing the company’s “competent and substantial evidence,” the commission concluded that mining in the Peace River watershed “will not cause a degradation of water quality or adverse impacts on water quantity within the affected watershed.”

There can be no discounting the potential hazards or the environmental impacts. Mosaic’s team of ecologists, engineers and biologists have proven to be creative in restoration and reclamation, as a tour of some projects indicates.

In fertilizer production, phosphate ore is extracted from the clay and sand that surrounded it underground by applying sulfuric acid. That process creates toxic waste called phosphogypsum, which contains uranium and radium. The phosphogypsum is stored in the soaring and expansive stacks with wastewater left from fertilizer manufacturing pumped on top of the stacks, forming acidic lakes.

At Mosaic’s New Wales fertilizer plant in Polk County in September, a sinkhole under a stack formed and 200 million gallons of that acidic wastewater drained into the Floridan aquifer. Environmentalists dispute the claim by Mosaic, supported by the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, that all the polluted water remained on the company’s property. That and other spills give pause, but they are rare occurrences. Certainly there is the potential for other accidents, but if that is the measure by which we judge projects, little would be accomplished.

County commissioners should approve Mosaic’s request.

Read more here: <http://www.bradenton.com/opinion/editorials/article128650939.html#storylink=cpy>