

Contaminated Land News - June 2000

Events last month illustrate there is more to keep land contamination experts occupied than Part IIA and planning issues.

- The massive forest fire threatening (as I write) the Los Alamos research Laboratory was started deliberately - to clear scrub. Los Alamos is, broadly, the US equivalent to the Atomic Weapons Establishment at Aldermaston in Berkshire. Staff were evacuated and hundreds of homes destroyed leading to the declaration of a federal disaster - releasing funds and requiring prompt processing of insurance claims.
- In mid May a fire in the Netherlands resulted in a series of massive explosions at a fireworks factory in Enschede, near the German border. The explosion damaged hundreds of buildings. There were a number of fatalities and scores of injuries. It took the combined efforts of Dutch and German fire-fighters to bring the blaze under control. Local people are questioning the siting of the factory in a residential area. Video footage of the exploding fireworks showed scenes of devastation reminiscent of an aerial bombardment.
- Back in the UK, the COMAH regulations have been applied by the Health and Safety Executive to a large contaminated site. They cited the large likely volumes of contaminated soil and the consequences of an controlled release as justification.
- At the same time a further and reportedly final round of consultation on the integrated pollution prevention and control regime was announced by DETR prior to full implementation in the summer. Details of the consultation documents may be found at www.detr.gov.uk

Meanwhile Part IIA has now been in force for two months and no remediation notices have been served yet. However there have been several instances of local authorities being asked to serve a notice by owners or occupiers of adjacent land. LA staff however have found that not all the claims stand up to detailed scrutiny. In other cases, whistle-blowers have been reluctant to disclose their sources of information - fearing that to do so would incriminate themselves as well.

Elsewhere in the UK a second world war bomb was set off during construction works resulting in minor injuries. Uncertainty over contaminated land liabilities has been reported to have threatened a major corporate take-over - at the last minute. The Geological Society's Engineering Group has convened a working group to compile a report on the use of clay as a construction material - including clay as an engineered low permeability barrier and an active treatment barrier.

The Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution is considering the issue of environmental planning. Background papers are available from www.rcep.org.uk. Comments and contributions have been invited. RCEP reports are sources of well thought out, independent and frequently challenging reviews of key issues. As the debate on the re-use of brownfield sites rages and the greenbelts around some of our major cities are threatened with development, the contaminated land industry should ensure that its ability to bring land back into beneficial use is reflected in the commission's findings.

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