

Bill might broaden analysis of waste dumps

By JEFF TOLLEFSON
The New Mexican

The New Mexico Environment Department is one step closer to approving the state's first hazardous-waste dump, but opponents are hoping the Legislature will establish one more legal hurdle.

A hearing officer's report to the New Mexico Environment Department recom-



mends the agency issue Gandy-Marley Inc. a permit to open the Triassic Park Waste Disposal facility east

of Roswell. The report suggests the facility be allowed to accept waste from Mexico and advises that the Environment Department require more groundwater-monitoring wells as well as a plan for controlling erosion.

The department is accepting comments through Feb. 15 on the document. Environment Secretary Pete Maggiore must make a decision by March 18. The secretary has broad discretion to deny the permit, follow the hearing officer's report, implement new conditions or reopen the case.

Activists opposed to the project, however, are placing their hopes on a piece of legislation introduced by Senate President Pro-Tem Richard Romero, D-Albuquerque. Senate Joint Memorial 31 would require the Environment Department, before issuing any new permits, to draft legislation requiring the state analyze impacts of proposed waste dumps on not only the environment but also public services such as schools and emergency-response services.

"We need to know the impacts. We need a task

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force or some kind of body that is going to look at the impacts statewide to the health, to the transportation, to the local tax base," said Joni Arends of Concerned Citizens for Nuclear Safety. Currently, she said, citizens' comments on social and economic issues fall on the deaf ears of environmental regulators.

On Wednesday, the Senate Rules Committee amended the bill to include currently pending permits, an effort activists hope would include the Triassic Park proposal. It was not clear Thursday, however, whether the current language would affect the park. The bill only requires the department to draft legislation, which would be considered next year.

Romero said he wasn't certain the bill, if passed in its current form, would delay the waste dump. He

noted some testimony on Wednesday indicated Triassic Park could be affected.

Moreover, the legislation is headed for its second committee meeting today, but it could be difficult for Romero to carry the bill all the way through the legislative process in the last week of the session.

Greg Lewis, director of the Water and Waste Management Division, said in an interview Wednesday, that his agency recognizes the public wants to broaden the analysis of waste dumps to include public infrastructure, economics and the like. Nonetheless, he said, the state's environmental statutes only give the Environment Department so much authority when issuing such permits.

"I think that we are in agreement that what we do does not consider economic impact or public services such as schools in any serious manner. Nor does our statute give us the

ability to do so," Lewis said.

"In a lot of ways, these are local zoning issues," he said. He noted local counties or communities should be able to decide whether they want the dump or not. "That's not our battle. If it's decided to put one in, we want to ensure that it's in an environmentally protective manner."

If the bill passes, Lewis said, the Environment Department would probably develop some kind of interagency task force to handle economic and social questions of both solid- and hazardous-waste

dumps.

At this point, activists would be pleased with such an outcome. People like Deborah Reade of the Albuquerque-based Citizens for Alternatives to Radioactive Dumping fear the state is going too far under the guise of economic development.

Victor Blaire is lobbying for Romero's bill on behalf of a non-profit water association that serves roughly 1,000 people in the area where Triassic Park is proposed. Blaire also formed an environmental group to fight Triassic Park and similar proposals. He contends a

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hazardous-waste dump is not compatible with local agriculture.

Blaire also said he fears the ultimate goal of Gandy-Marley is to open the dump to low-level radioactive wastes. He cites a Feb. 4 memorandum from Triassic Park officials to the Environment Department indicating that such a change may be requested "a couple of years after permit issuance."

"Once again, the Land of Enchantment is being targeted as the waste capital of the world, which is rather disenchanting," Blaire said.

Officials with Gandy-Marley Inc. could not be reached for comment Thursday afternoon.

To comment on the hearing officer's report regarding Triassic Park, write to New Mexico Environment Department, Attention: Carolyn Vigil, 1190 St. Francis Drive, Room North 2150, Santa Fe, N.M. 87505. For more information, contact the department at 827-2855.