

Comments Submitted by Dr. Fred Opper - A Wilmington Physician Who Opposes Titan Cement

Why have over 200 local physicians, including most of our town's pediatricians and pulmonologists, urged the cessation of the proposed Titan Cement Factory in Castle Hayne?

Those in favor of this factory attempt to paint their opponents as "anti-job," "anti-development" environmental extremists. Physicians, however, are generally rather conservative, small business owners who have a profound interest in the economic development of our region. Cement production is a particularly noxious activity. The medical literature clearly documents increased risks of serious respiratory problems in proximity to such plants. Titan has applied for a permit allowing it to emit toxic amounts of mercury. In addition, according to Martha Keating of Duke University, sulfur dioxide, sulfate particulate matter, nitrogen oxides, hydrochloric acid and other inevitable by-products of cement production are of grave concern. She warns us that some of these by-products have been known to cause cancer, others impair reproduction and normal development of children, and can worsen conditions like asthma, leading to emergency room visits and hospitalizations.

Titan advocates argue that the area is already zoned for industry and is the former site of a cement factory. However, not only has our knowledge and awareness of toxic industries grown in the 27 years since the previous cement factory closed, but the area itself is no longer appropriate for such a factory. The town has expanded and now more than 8,000 children will live or attend school within 5 miles of the factory.

Titan's claim that it will meet all state and federal safety requirements is of small comfort. Scientists know that there is often decades lag between the awareness of an environmental threat and the political will necessary to protect us from it. Second-hand smoke has long been known to cause significant disease. Only recently and hesitantly have states moved to protect its citizens. Along similar lines, the use of seatbelts has long been known to save lives. Yet again, only relatively recently have seatbelt laws been widely enacted. How many lives would have been saved if protective measures were enacted sooner? How will the parents of New Hanover and Pender Counties react in 10-20 years when they realize that they allowed their children and grandchildren to grow up in the toxic shadow cast by Titan Cement?

Titan has recently paid for a study by Intertox which purports to show that the mercury released by their factory will have a negligible effect on our counties' citizens. This study conveniently omits data on the 140 other toxins that cement factories admit releasing into the environment. It comes as no surprise that the Intertox study, financed by Titan, arrives at this shockingly benign conclusion. The medical literature is replete with thousands of articles and opinion pieces demonstrating the huge bias in favor of a product when the research is funded by the product's manufacturer. This study, like all others paid for by producers of poisons, cannot be taken seriously. Despite the fact that Titan promises to limit its output of toxins to permitted values, experts like Harvard trained Dr. Stephen Lester, Director of the Center for Health Environment and Justice, and Dr. Philip Landrigan Professor of Pediatrics at The Mount Sinai School of Medicine, agree that there is NO safe level of mercury exposure for children. Put another way, all levels of mercury exposure can be harmful to fetuses and small children.

Titan claims that they are managing the risk by adhering to regulations. Over 300 local health care workers disagree. Whom will you trust with the health of your family? Will you trust an international cement conglomerate and well-intentioned but misinformed local businessmen and politicians? Or will you trust your physicians?