



The Saxon Pit waste site at Whittlesey

## Why the EA is under fire over hazardous waste in a Saxon pit

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**If the Environment Agency thought it could bury the small matter of 122,000 tonnes of waste deposited on the site of an old brickworks just outside the north Cambridgeshire town of Whittlesey – waste subsequently revealed to contain significant quantities of hazardous chemicals – then it was mistaken.**

An alliance of the area's MP, who is also the chief secretary to the Treasury, the district council and a local town councillor, activist and blogger have combined to ensure the agency's failure either to adequately communicate exactly what has happened, or to convince local residents it has a plan to deal with the problem, won't go away.

This story goes back more than three years, to December 2017, when – according to Fenland district council leader Chris Boden – “a significant number of local residents” complained of foul smells coming from Saxon Pit, a waste disposal site just outside of Whittlesey. As Boden explains, they quickly took the matter up with the Environment Agency.

“Eventually, and it did take a lot of time, it became clear that a significant amount – but we didn’t know how much – of unauthorised material had been deposited in the pit, contrary to the EA’s licence requirements,” he said.

But it was only towards the end of 2020, Boden insisted – three years on from when residents first noticed the nasty odours – that local people became aware of the scale of the problem, and even then they weren’t told what exactly the hazardous materials were.



And this is where the story takes a strange twist. When the ENDS Report contacted the EA and asked what the illegally dumped materials were, it was told they were “believed to be automotive shredder residue (ASR)” containing copper, zinc and “total petroleum hydrocarbons” (a term used to denote a wide group of chemicals derived from crude oil).

ASR, it added, is a by-product of the metal recycling and end-of-life vehicle sector. Asked why this had never been communicated to local residents, the EA

replied, “We have no records of being asked this question until now.”

ENDS showed the EA statement to Cllr Boden, who said it came as a big surprise. “The most detail we’ve ever been given was that the non-conforming waste was trommel material,” he said.

Whittlesey town councillor Roy Gerstner also disputed the EA’s interpretation of events. “Having spoken over the weekend with a number of residents who have been involved from the very beginning, they and I are amazed at the EA’s reply to you,” he said.

Fenland council has now agreed the wording of resolution calling on the EA to provide them with the analysis from 50 boreholes drilled into the waste and full details of any contaminants that have been released into local water courses and which the agency is monitoring. And it has moved to block an application for planning permission, made by a separate operator to the one responsible for the waste disposal breaches, for a waste recycling plant.

Also pitted against the EA is local MP Stephen Barclay, the chief secretary to the Treasury. In a post on his Facebook page on 3 February, Barclay lambasted the agency for considering a licence application for the site to be used for the recycling of bottom end ash when it had failed to deal with the more urgent problem of what had been illegally dumped there.

“It is simply not acceptable for residents that, after almost three years, there is still no outcome regarding the unlawful waste, yet new permits are being considered,” Barclay said. “The Environment Agency need to do more to address the legitimate concerns of residents, and I will continue to raise this issue with them.”

The EA’s proposals to allow the operator to leave the waste on site and then cap it, and its failure so far to take any enforcement action against the operator, were also criticised by Barclay. The site flooded during recent heavy rains, and this was then pumped out into the King’s Dyke.

“While they say this was a one-off incident, the fact that investigations are still ongoing does not build confidence, especially as they have yet to reach a satisfactory outcome, both in terms of the final restoration scheme and the

ongoing monitoring and containment measures for the unlawful waste,” Barclay said.

Neither the district council nor local residents are going to let the matter go. Fenland council is proposing to report any more communication failures by the EA to Barclay and to both the environment and business secretaries. “We consider [this] to be a major breach in environment law and it has dented our confidence in how the EA has handled this incident,” Gerstner said.

In a statement given to ENDS, the EA said its investigation into the unlawful deposit of “non-conforming waste” at Saxon Pit was ongoing. “We have agreed with the operator that the waste in question can remain buried subject to strict conditions that ensure the effective remediation and full restoration of Saxon Pit,” it said.

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