



More of
 ← this near
 this? →



Photos by JAMIE FRANCIS/THE OREGONIAN

TOP | Riverbend Landfill and Recycling Center takes about a fifth of the Metro region's trash and wants to expand at its site near McMinnville.
ABOVE | Ramsey McPhillips, the grandson of Oregon's first Environmental Quality Commission chairman, has battled Riverbend for years. His family's 520-acre homestead and farm is next to the landfill.

A plan to expand a Metro-area landfill near a flood plain in Yamhill County's wine country is likely to be a tough sell

By **SCOTT LEARN**
 THE OREGONIAN

McMINNVILLE — Rising trash from Portland's west side has helped fill a landfill in the heart of Oregon's wine country and next door to the gently rolling south fork of the Yamhill River.

Riverbend Landfill piles its garbage roughly 20 stories high. But the facility, built in the early '80s, will be at capacity in six years if it doesn't have room to grow, says Waste Management, the owner. Now the company wants to expand Riverbend to take trash for another two to three decades.

The expansion won't come easy, if at all. Landfill neighbors, who fear pollution and wrecked countryside, vow to fight — and to push the Portland area to haul its trash east of the Cascades.

It's a classic growth challenge: As the metropolitan region's population and wealth grow, so does the amount of garbage it generates.

Landfill opponents, backed by their own "McDumpville" Web site, are vowing to get a measure on Yamhill County's November ballot to prohibit landfill expansion next to a flood plain. The

Please see **LANDFILL**, Page A7



MICHAEL MODE/THE OREGONIAN

Landfill: Expansion may be partly in flood plain

Continued from Page One

county's last anti-landfill initiative, in 1992, passed 2-1 but was tossed out as unconstitutional.

They are also pressuring the Metro regional government to shift the Portland-area waste to Waste Management's Columbia Ridge landfill near Arlington, saying it poses far less environmental risk than Riverbend's rainy and fragile site. McMinnville gets 42 inches of rain a year; Arlington gets 9.

More than 40 percent of Riverbend's trash — 229,000 tons last year — comes from Metro territory, Washington County in particular.

"We're supposed to be making progress environmentally, but this expansion puts the landfill closer to the river and closer to a tourist route," said Ramsey McPhillips, a landfill neighbor and longtime opposition leader. "At this point, we should know better about solid waste."

A portion of Riverbend, southwest of McMinnville, is in the Yamhill River's 100-year flood plain, and the expansion would likely partially encroach on the flood plain, too.

Oregon's Department of Environmental Quality is officially neutral about where landfills get built, as long as they meet federal and state rules. Yamhill County gets roughly \$750,000 a year in fees from the landfill and relatively low garbage rates for residents.

And Waste Management has sunk millions into the property to make it trash-ready.

The work includes berms to protect against floods and double liners and leak detection systems that exceed federal regulations on the newer portions of the landfill. The landfill is be-

ing equipped to turn methane into electricity. It has a state-of-the-art leachate collection system that pumps landfill water to a 22 million-gallon lagoon used to water groves of poplar trees.

Environmental regulators say Riverbend has had only one groundwater contamination violation, in the early 1990s. The company has already purchased the land for its planned expansion. And it says it would put a berm planted with evergreen trees along Oregon 18 to prevent drivers to the coast from seeing the expanded landfill.

"We're in a wet environment, but we can operate a landfill very efficiently in a wet environment," says George Duvendack, Riverbend's manager. "We've invested tens of millions of dollars in infrastructure here. We'd like to use that infrastructure."

About a fifth of the trash generated in Metro's region goes to Riverbend, with most of the remaining household trash going to Columbia Ridge. The eastern Oregon landfill has room to take more trash, Metro officials said — estimates range from 50 to 100 years of capacity left there.

But transporting it 150 miles east up the Columbia River Gorge would increase pollution and cost at least \$10 more a ton than the 30-mile trip to Riverbend, a significant chunk given Metro's \$75-a-ton total tip fee.

David Bragdon, the president of the Metro council, said he has asked Metro staff to evaluate how much legal leverage Metro has over waste going to Riverbend.

"The case (McPhillips) is making is even if we don't have the legal right to regulate Riverbend directly, we have a moral obligation to be concerned about where our trash is going," Bragdon said. "I think he's right. It shouldn't be out of site, out of mind for us. On the other hand, it is the County Commission that's elected to look out for Yamhill County."

The three-member commission is in tough spot, given the money the county receives

from the landfill. But if the 1990s vote is an indication, residents don't like having a big landfill in their backyards.

The commission could vote against expansion or take other steps, such as limiting heights and flood plain development. They can't legally bar out-of-county waste.

McPhillips and crew are a formidable pressure group. McPhillips, 50, went to high school at Catlin Gabel with Bragdon and is the grandson of Barney McPhillips, the first chairman of Oregon's Environmental Quality Commission. The family's 520-acre homestead and farm is next door to the landfill, which rises above it. And McPhillips has the resources and the tenacity to mount legal fights.

McPhillips says his stream on the family's property is polluted by landfill runoff and stray garbage, with regulators slow to act. Citizens were led to believe that the landfill would top out at 70 feet, opponents say. And they're angry at what they see as murky flood plain rules.

Landfill officials say they're trying to be good neighbors, including covering the working face of the landfill at the end of each day to reduce odors, putting up a 50-foot nylon fence to keep trash off McPhillips' property and developing wildlife habitat between the landfill and the river.

The landfill's 285-foot allowed height was effectively authorized in a grading plan approved by DEQ, but it received little local scrutiny.

Duvendack, the landfill's manager, said he realizes that will be different for the expansion, which he says will require heights "somewhat higher" than the current landfill.

Waste Management will sculpt the landfill into contours and seed it to match nearby grassy hills and oak knolls, Duvendack said. "It's not like we're building a square box and sticking it up in the air."

Oregon bars putting a landfill in a flood plain if it reduces water storage capacity or could result in garbage washout.

Waste Management says the landfill's berms prevent floodwaters from reaching the trash. But the effects of building partially in a flood plain will likely get much more scrutiny this time.

State regulators did require Riverbend to exceed federal liner standards when it built new cells. The landfill's older cells are lined with just clay but above what state officials say is dense soil.

Opponents note that Waste Management's lobbyists called rainy-area landfills risky in the 1990s — before the company was purchased by USA Waste, which owned Riverbend — in an attempt to get some of Riverbend's business.

McPhillips says he worked with Waste Management's public relations firm at the time, PacWest Communications, to write letters criticizing Riverbend. Officials at PacWest, who no longer represent Waste Management, say they don't remember that.

John Pichtel, an environmental management professor and expert in solid waste issues at Ball State University in Indiana, said trucking waste east has its own environmental costs and Waste Management's leachate collection system at Riverbend sounds strong.

But the two major risks for landfills are leachate and methane gas production, Pichtel said, both higher in rainy environments. And no landfill liner is 100 percent impermeable.

"What's going to happen in 50 years with a closed landfill?" he said. "Rodents burrow in, tree roots (infiltrate the cap), there could be a significant flood, who knows?"

McPhillips, a horticulturist, is banking on that sentiment. He'd like to turn his family farm into a horticultural school complete with training gardens.

"I always dreamed this would be my greatest creation, and I just assumed the landfill would close in 2014," he said. "Now they could be around for another 20 to 40 years."

WEDNESDAY

JUNE 18, 2008

The Oregonian

THE OREGONIAN • WEDNESDAY, JUNE 18, 2008

METRO | WORLD



JAMIE FRANCIS/THE OREGONIAN

Ramsey McPhillips says trash frequently blows off Riverbend Landfill or approaching garbage trucks and onto his family's 150-year-old homestead near McMinnville and next to the landfill. Riverbend's operators, Waste Management, recently put up a 50-foot-high nylon fence to try to better contain the trash.