

Cement plant in Helena under goes up grade



11 HOURS AGO • **BY BUTCH LARCOMBE OF MONTANA LEE NEWSPAPERS**

\$13M project aims to reduce dust emissions

Ash Grove Cement, a low-key player in the Helena area's slender manufacturing sector, is in the midst of a \$13 million project that is intended to reduce the amount of dust in the big cement plant's emissions.

It's a big move for Ash Grove and the Montana City plant, which has operated in a rocky draw along Prickly Pear Creek for nearly five decades.

The investment comes during a lean time for Ash Grove and is aimed at helping the plant meet new air-quality standards.

"It's the largest capital project this plant has ever done, hands down. By four times," Dick Johnson, the plant manager, said last week.

The project involves the construction of a "baghouse," which will hold 1,600 bags, each about six inches in diameter and 24 feet long, which act as air filters

"It just collects dust essentially," said Jeff Briggs, the plant's environmental manager.

“It’s essentially a big vacuum. But it’s a lot more efficient obviously.”

Work on the project began in May and Johnson expects the baghouse to be in operation in mid-November. It will include two tall silos made of steel and concrete, one to hold lime, the other waste dust.

“It’s going to do a much better job of filtering the dust out of the emissions, a much, much, much better job,” said Johnson.

Apparently, officials at the Montana Department of Environmental Quality agree. The agency has signed off on Ash Grove’s plan for the baghouse and other changes. Such technology is not uncommon at cement plants, said Craig Henrikson, an environmental engineer with the agency.

“Those (baghouses) typically capture 95 percent of any particulates that would come off the plant,” Henrikson said.

Stricter standards for cement operations issued by the federal Environmental Protection Agency are the impetus for the pricey upgrade at Ash Grove and other operations. Cement operations have until Sept. 9, 2014, to meet the standards.

If the baghouse is complete and in operation by November, “they are definitely getting it done well ahead of the compliance schedule,” Henrikson noted.

Ash Grove currently uses what is called an electrostatic precipitator to remove particulates from its emissions. The older technology is no match for the stricter emission standards from the EPA.

“They can’t meet the standard, not even close,” Johnson said of precipitators.

Accounts from the Associated Press published earlier this year said Ash Grove, the Holcim cement plant near Three Forks and the Colstrip coal-fired power plant owned by PPL Montana would need to make a combined \$90 million in upgrades to comply

with the new standards, which are intended to reduce haze. Of that figure, more than \$80 million would need to be spent at the Colstrip operation. PPL officials have questioned the cost and whether the changes would lead to significant reductions in haze.

The relatively small plant in Montana City is one of eight cement plants owned by Ash Grove, which is headquartered in Overland Park, Kan. The company is currently installing baghouses at several other cement plants.

“We are one of the few companies in the country that has acted immediately in complying with the new standard,” Johnson said.

The project won’t increase the Montana City plant’s productivity or yield any new permanent jobs, officials said. While some local subcontractors have a small piece of the baghouse project, two out-of-state contractors hired by the Ash Grove corporate office are undertaking the steel and concrete work and installing the industrial components of the baghouse, Johnson said.

While the project will clearly reduce particulate emissions, it comes with a trade-off in the form of an annual increase in electricity consumption that could reach 25 percent. The Montana City plant buys electricity from PPL Montana.

“It increases our energy footprint substantially,” Johnson said.

The \$13 million tab comes at a time when Ash Grove is battling a significant decline in the construction industry. The economic slowdown prompted the company to furlough workers during winter months in each of the past three years at a number of its plants, including the one in Montana City.

Cement is a key component in concrete, used in projects stretching from new homes to sizable commercial projects. Much of Ash Grove’s product finds its way to ready-mix plants around the region. The Montana City plant provided the cement used on the

Custer Interchange project and is supplying cement for a sizable project at Rainbow Dam in Great Falls. Projects related to the Bakken oil boom in eastern Montana and western North Dakota have also helped the Helena-area operation.

While the furloughed workers have been back to work for some time at the Montana City plant, demand for the cement produced there has improved only slightly, according to Johnson.

“Our business is probably down 25 percent from 2006 or so,” Johnson said. “Last year, it was probably down 35 percent.”

The plant has 76 employees.

As workers in bright orange shirts sweated over pieces of structural steel, the skeleton of the new baghouse, in the hot afternoon sun one day last week, the plant manager noted the outlook for cement demand remains hazy.

“It hasn’t gotten any worse but it hasn’t gotten any better,” Johnson said. “This is a tough time to do this project from a capital standpoint.”