

December 15, 2003

The Honorable Virgil H. Goode, Jr.  
House of Representatives  
70 East Court Street, Room 215  
Rocky Mount, VA 24151

Sir:

We are writing about an urgent environmental matter in Chatham, with the hope and prospect that you may be able to bring together the appropriate persons and agencies to effect both immediate and long-term relief. The Chatham plant of Columbia Forest Products is the source of the difficulties. Those difficulties in the past involved toxic drainage and presently involve heavy odiferous smoke and (most urgently) extreme noise.

We the undersigned are the adjoining neighbors of Columbia Forest Products, all living in historic homes (the Mitchells and Fletcher Watson reside in residentially-zoned Chatham, the Gillispies on nearby agriculturally-zoned property in Pittsylvania County). We are among the numerous affected residents.

Attached are several 1996-97 letters regarding the toxic spill, including a rough draft of a letter sent from one of us (Harry Gillispie) to Senator Robb, and subsequent correspondence from the EPA Philadelphia office, the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality, and Congressman L. F. Payne, referring us to you for further follow-up if needed.

Although as far as we know the specific drainage issue was resolved in 1997, it is our understanding that related monitoring by EPA/DEQ of Columbia Forest's sawdust emissions is now involved in problematic changes at the plant. Those changes have resulted in frequent heavy smoke; accompanying sediments; smells reminiscent of burning tires, tile cement, paint thinner, alcohol, and the like; and sound levels which have escalated from a rustle and hum to extremely oppressive roars and whines 24 hours a day.

As a result, several nearby residents face not only high-stress living conditions, but imminent financial ruin. Among the signers of this letter, the Mitchells have the prospect of having to close their bed-and-breakfast and even evacuating their premises (in order to facilitate sleep), with no hope of sale; and the Gillispies, Fletcher Watson, and numerous other residents are experiencing precipitous loss of property value along with physical and aesthetic discomfort. One recently-widowed neighbor urgently needs to sell her large home, but has no prospect of being able to do so.

All of this is in an area which was quite desirable until recent factory noise and smoke problems developed. In fact, the difficulties are abruptly and literally casting a pall over the town of Chatham, which has long had a very deserving reputation of historicity and quiet atmosphere, and has recently been attracting new residents for those reasons.

The noise and smoke often follow the valleys leading from the plant on the western edge of town to Main Street and beyond. Different spots are affected variously, depending on the lay of the land and weather conditions. The smell is at times evident at Chatham Hall, on the east side of town. The noise can be heard at Hargrave Military Academy to the northeast of the plant.

Attempts to coordinate with factory officials have involved much discussion, but so far have brought no relief. In fact, there have been significant upticks in the noise in early October and again in late November. We cannot know for sure, but suspect that there are numerous causes of the noise increases, each needing remedy by baffling, damping, and/or shielding. Since the greatest problems are tuba-like roars and pure pipe-organ-like tones, it seems evident that there are difficulties with (or lack of) baffles. With the situation now so far out of hand, it seems certain that analysis and corrective design by skilled professional acoustical engineers will be necessary.

Over forty residents petitioned Chatham's Town Council for help in early November (copy attached; local news articles are available on-line if needed). An appointed committee immediately opened discussions with Columbia Forest plant manager David Abts. Committee members are also gathering information about the current situation, and may recommend long-term changes in local ordinances. Unfortunately, they may not be able to produce results in time to avert disaster for several of the most-affected parties. (Town Council's committee is comprised of Dr. Bill Black, faculty member at Chatham Hall; and Allan Andersen, director of the Onishi-Davenport Aquatic Center at Hargrave.)

Pittsylvania County and Chatham's noise ordinances are porous or non-existent, a situation which can probably be remedied in time. However, it does reflect the fact that our small community has previously had no experience in dealing with a situation like this, does not have the legal and administrative structures in place to move quickly, and will need assistance in putting in place a workable and effective model.

One of the signers of this letter (Henry Mitchell) has spoken with DEQ inspector Craig Nicol in Lynchburg, who indicates that the main concern of DEQ inspection at the factory is reduction of raw sawdust emissions. He further indicated that regulations allow burning of wood products (but residents question, based on smells, whether it is solely wood products that are being burned), and therefore smoke and smell are not a DEQ issue, and further, that noise (even if caused by DEQ-mandated changes) is not of DEQ concern either, but must be handled locally.

It seems to us, however, that if EPA and DEQ are providing oversight and direction in the containment, movement, and burning of sawdust, they certainly could provide assistance and direction to both the plant management and to the town and county in resolving the new problems (which result from the containment, movement, and burning of sawdust), those new problems being much more harmful in their wider local effects than the initial sawdust problem.

In summary, our particular needs are:

1. Dramatic reduction of Columbia Forest's noise problems, immediately for the sake of close neighbors who are critically affected, and over the long term for the area as a whole;
2. Dramatic reduction of smoke and smell, to include thorough analysis of its cause and content;
3. Development of workable local regulatory structures as necessary, hopefully based on proven successful models in other locales.

We will be deeply appreciative of any assistance you can give that will break the current impasse involving federal, state, and local governments, and corporate management, and bring a swift cooperative solution to the problems which are so harshly affecting innocent neighbors, and could also be detrimental to Columbia Forest's many hard-working employees. Thank you very much for your close attention to our situation.

Sincerely yours,

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Enclosures:

- DEQ - Columbia Forest Notice of Noncompliance, 3/11/97
- Rep. L. F. Payne - Harry Gillispie letter, 12/6/96
- Rep. L. F. Payne - Harry Gillispie letter, 12/3/96
- EPA - Rep. L. F. Payne letter, 11/27/96
- Sen. Charles S. Robb - Harry Gillispie letter, 11/18/96
- Rough draft of Harry Gillispie - Sen. Charles S. Robb letter, 11/96
- Petition of citizens to Chatham Town Council, 11/3/03