

Phosphate Pollution Reports Give Florida Residents Déjà VU

September 3, 2021



Craig Pittman has said it all again. We will comment on only two things. First, when the monster sinkhole opened up, both DEP and Mosaic failed to warn nearby residents that their wells might be potentially contaminated; in the aftermath Mosaic eventually and grudgingly did offer an apology to the people. Our DEP did not— their response was defensive and was a statement that they had followed the letter of the law.

That makes a statement for our Department of Environmental Protection.

And quite a loud one.

Secondly, I like Craig's suggestion of putting the phosphogypsum around the homes of phosphate officials but we must remember that this radioactive waste is dangerous stuff in many ways. When spread on the ground it would still pose a threat to the public because rain and gravity would move it into our waterways and eventually the aquifer. That was why putting it on roadways was such a stupid idea and why our current leadership in Washington cancelled the plan.

Read the complete article here [in Florida Phoenix](#).

*Comments by OSFR historian Jim Tatum.
jim.tatum@oursantaferiver.org
– A river is like a life: once taken,
it cannot be brought back © Jim Tatum*

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Craig Pittman

September 2, 2021 7:00 am One summer when I was in college, I worked at a Pensacola textbook warehouse. One of my co-workers was a funny guy named Jim. While we packed boxes of textbooks to ship all over the country, Jim would be cracking us up with one-liners, jokes and stories.

Jim was a huge fan of *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, and sometimes quoted from its absurd sketches. One day, he told us about a sketch where Michael Palin, playing the anchor of a show

called "[It's the Mind](#)," announces the topic will be déjà vu, then is startled to discover he's stuck repeating words and actions over and over for the rest of the show.

"Tonight on 'It's the Mind,' we examine the phenomenon of déjà vu, that strange feeling we sometimes get that we've lived through something before," Jim said, mimicking Palin's British accent. Then he said it again and we all laughed. And then he said it again and we laughed again, but not as hard. By the eighth or ninth time that day, though, we'd stopped laughing. The gag had stopped being funny.

I thought about Jim this weekend when a boat captain named Karl Deigert forwarded to me an Aug. 25 public notice that the Florida Department of Environmental Protection had sent out reporting a problem at one of our phosphate plants.

The report came from Mosaic's Bartow plant in Polk County. Workers there had been inspecting one of the ponds of acidic waste and discovered "suspected liner tears" in a pond, "resulting in the probable release of an indeterminate amount of process water."

Released where? The notice didn't say. How much polluted "process water" was released? Unknown, according to the notice. How did those liners get torn? Again, a mystery.

You may know Mosaic from its [TV commercials](#) bragging about what a great environmental steward the company is. As with TV ads touting various beers, cars and insurance companies, the glossiness of the commercial is an indication that the makers valued slick production values over telling the whole story.

Those TV ads full of roseate spoonbills and tranquil prairies never show you Mosaic's phosphate miners gouging out big holes in the ground. Nor do they show the phosphate processing plants

that turn the rock into fertilizer, then pile up the radioactive waste in gigantic heaps known as phosphogypsum stacks.

Nor do they show you the accidental pollution releases that happen over and over – spills from the ponds atop those gyp stacks, spills via sinkholes that open up beneath them and problems with other types of pollution as well.

If they did, they'd have to recruit Michael Palin to come in and talk about the feeling that you've lived through this before. And then he'd have to say it again. And again.

“Awkward” timing, to say the least

I blame Fred Flintstone for this. According to the animators at Hanna-Barbera, the cartoon caveman with the nonsensical catchphrase constantly dropped big prehistoric bones all over the ground whenever he ate. That yabba-dabba-don't is how Fred created a bunch of fossils for future humans to find.

The discovery that launched Florida's phosphate industry happened in 1889 when a man named Albertus Vogt noticed, in a spring near Dunnellon, some prehistoric fossils (whether left by Fred or not, history does not say). Vogt recalled similar fossils turning up near phosphate deposits in South Carolina and hired someone to dig. Sure enough, the Florida fossils turned out to be a sign of extensive phosphate in the ground.

What happened next was like the California gold rush, but without the glitter.

“News of this great find spread,” the Florida Industrial and [Phosphate Research Institute reports](#). “Thousands of prospectors and speculators flooded the area and the great Florida phosphate boom had begun. By 1894 more than 215 phosphate mining companies were operating statewide.”

According to the DEP, there are now 27 [phosphate mines](#) in Florida, covering more than 450,000 acres, but of the 27, only nine are still active. As they dig, the miners “disturb” – i.e., destroy, and then later try to restore – 3,000 to 6,000 acres of the Florida landscape every year.

As they process the phosphate to turn it into fertilizer, they produce about five tons of phosphogypsum waste to every ton of fertilizer. Because the waste is somewhat radioactive, the plants pile it up into stacks. They are Florida’s mini-Rockies, higher than anything else in the otherwise flat Central Florida landscape.



Piney Point. Source: Florida Department of Environmental Protection.

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A lot of people blame the Piney Point spill for feeding a recent red tide algae bloom in the bay, just as a lot of experts say over-using fertilizer in your yard can lead to polluted stormwater that prolongs toxic algae blooms along the coast and kills seagrass and manatees.

The other gyp stack that made headlines was one owned by Mosaic

– which wasn't a shock. Over the years [Mosaic has gotten in trouble](#) with federal regulators over air pollution and hazardous chemical violations at its Florida plants. Nothing compared to what happened five years ago, though.

What made a really big splash – so to speak – is that a huge sinkhole opened up beneath one of the company's gyp stacks. The sinkhole, 45 feet wide and 220 feet deep, drained 215 million gallons of wastewater from a pond on the top of the stack, slurping it down into the aquifer like a thirsty customer in one of those slick TV beer ads.

That was at Mosaic's New South Wales plant in Mulberry. Remember that name.

For three weeks, neither Mosaic nor the DEP alerted the public about the potentially dangerous situation involving Mulberry's drinking water supply. That oversight made even then-Gov. Rick Scott angry. This is a governor who generally ranked "concern for the environment" somewhere below "polishing my cowboy boots" and "making sure my Navy cap is handy for wear during the next disaster" on his list of priorities.

Scott was so ticked off that he pushed a bill through the Legislature requiring polluters to work with the DEP on issuing timely notices to the public when there's an incident such as that one – notices such as the rather vague one issued on Aug. 25.

Ironically, on the same day that DEP notice went out about a torn liner at [Mosaic's Bartow facility](#), the DEP was holding a public information session in Polk County about Mosaic's latest permit request. The company wants to expand that same gyp stack at the New South Wales plant.

"While the events were unrelated," the *Lakeland Ledger* reported,

in a nice turn of phrase, “the timing was awkward.”

Yes, as my friend Jim would have agreed, you can say that again...and again.

Journey to the Center of the Earth?

I checked with Mosaic spokeswoman Jackie Barron about the Aug.25 pollution notice. She said it involved wastewater that didn't get outside its property boundaries. It had “shifted from one point in our internal system to another spot in our internal system. This release was local in nature so again we don't expect any off-site impact.”

The company still doesn't know the cause, she added, noting “we are removing the water from that area now so we can get a closer look. We'll need to do that before we know for sure.”

When I asked her about the permit for expanding the same gyp stack that the sinkhole had hit, she said the permit application could take five to 10 years to get a green light. But a graphic on the company's website showed Mosaic had applied for the permit in 2019 and received a draft permit – a sort of qualified yes – from DEP four months ago. The company is now awaiting permission from Polk County and expects to begin construction “mid-year.”

Barron also said that in order to earn government approval, the company has had to show how it's beefed up its ability to detect any underground anomalies that might lead to another sinkhole.

I found that somewhat ironic, given that this was not the first sinkhole to hit that particular plant and drain a gyp stack pond. The first time was in 1994. At 160 feet wide and 200 feet deep, that cavity was so big that wags dubbed it the new Disney ride, “Journey to the Center of the Earth.”

No matter what, though, Mosaic needs that permit so it can expand its current stack by another 230 acres. Generally, whatever the phosphate industry wants in Florida, the politicians are eager to hand over, usually while genuflecting.

“We are approaching capacity in our active stack,” Barron explained. “The expansion means uninterrupted production of fertilizer, critical to domestic food supply. It also provides employment security for the roughly 600 employees and dozens more contractors who rely on New Wales for good paying jobs and diverse career opportunities...And through it all we must comply with rigorous state and local standards.”

The industry’s long and repetitive history of spills and collapses and incidents makes me question just how “rigorous” those standards are for protecting the public.

Every time there’s a report of a problem with one of Florida’s gyp stacks, I think back to something that happened in 1997. Heavy rains poured down and ruptured a dike at a phosphate plant owned by the company that, at the time, also owned Piney Point.

Fifty-six million gallons of acidic wastewater flowed into the Alafia River and killed everything its path for 42 miles, including more than 1 million baitfish and shellfish and 72,900 gamefish and even trees growing on the river’s banks.

One state official has officially spoken out against giving Mosaic its permit: Agriculture Commissioner Nikki Fried. “Mosaic is acutely aware that the New Wales site is prone to sinkholes and ultimately, unsafe for long term management of gypsum stacks,” [Fried, a candidate for governor](#), said in her written comments submitted to the DEP. “I ask that you deny this expansion or any new phosphogypsum stack until our state can find a way to safely store phosphogypsum without risking the health and safety of our citizens and Florida’s precious

environment."I have for some time been racking my brains for ideas to stop the phosphate déjà vu cycle of disaster after disaster. I finally got a clue from Fried's statement. Clearly the problem is finding a safer place to store that waste other than in big piles. Now, I have a suggestion.From 1989 until last fall, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency banned doing anything with that radioactive waste other than stacking it. Then, in the waning days of the Trump administration, and with no prior notice to the public, the EPA suddenly gave the phosphate miners the okay to turn it into [roadbuilding material](#). One of the first things the Biden administration did this year was to reverse that ill-considered decision.

My suggestion is for the EPA to allow a very limited exception to its rules and allow the gyp stack waste to be put to use as driveway and access road material. Under my plan, the only place it can be used for building driveways and access roads is around the offices and homes of phosphate company officials. That way if there's any risk, it would be on the people who want to keep mining what's left of all those prehistoric animals – not the general public.

Does this sound like a ridiculous idea? Even a yabba-dabba-dopey one? Perhaps. But at least it's not repeating the same mistakes of the past, over and over and over. Because that's just not funny.