A temporary permit allowing Athens' sewage treatment plant to dump solid waste in a landfill has just expired. The sewage will now presumably pile up in holding tanks pending a court decision. Meanwhile, a permanent solution to waste disposal is years away.

MARIA KAGKELIDOU

ATHENS — A sewage treatment plant may soon have to look for a new place to dump its product—800 tonnes of viscous sludge a day—because of an ongoing legal battle between the plant and Attica's waste management authority. A temporary permit allowing the plant to dispose of the sludge in Athens' only legal landfill expires on April 28. Psyttaleia has already filed a petition to continue dumping. The European Union is unhappy with Greece's handling of the matter, and local authorities fear a large-scale environmental disaster.

Situated on the island of Psyttaleia off Athens, the sewage treatment plant is Europe's largest and most advanced. It purifies thousands of tonnes of waste water every day and pours them into the sea. The remaining solid waste has to be disposed of on land. When it started operating in 1998, Psyttaleia signed an agreement with the Association of Attica Municipalities and Communities (ESKDNA), which manages Athens' only legal landfill in Ano Liossia to dump the sludge at the site till 2008.

But Psyttaleia and ESKDNA fell foul of each other in March 2003, when the sludge caused a massive rubbish slide in the landfill, putting workers' lives at risk. ESKDNA accused Psyttaleia of being in breach of contract by providing sludge that was inadequately processed and not viscous enough. It refused to accept any more. Last March the Athens water company, EYDAP, which operates Psyttaleia, obtained a court order from Greece's highest court, the Council of State, forcing ESKDNA to reopen the site to sludge for two months. This is the permit that has now expired.

A Technical Chamber study completed in April 2004, part of which was obtained by the Athens News, confirms that sludge from Psyttaleia may have caused the slide. "The sludge was not correctly processed. It was very slippery and as a result the landslide was facilitated," points out the study, authored by Adamandios Skordilis, now head of...
Greece's solid waste management at the environment ministry.

"The sludge is putting people's lives in the landfill in danger. It was a miracle that we didn't lose any lives in 2003 - the rubbish slide happened on a public holiday," says George Hartas, president of the site's workers' association. The danger is ongoing. A second, smaller rubbish slide happened during last year's Olympics.

Ano Liossia authorities are so concerned over the runny sludge that they are refusing to allow EYDAP even to dump it in the landfill pit; instead, it is being dumped outside, in an illegal and unsanitised pit. EYDAP says it is fulfilling its contractual obligations to provide sludge to specification.

EYDAP says it will seek a new court order, but even if it succeeds, it will be a short-term victory. Ano Liossia will not last until 2008. The landfill is scheduled to fill up next July because it is receiving more waste than originally planned. Athens has no replacement landfill, and plans for an emergency site to tide the city over until a new permanent site is prepared are languishing in state bureaucracy.

"We will not allow more sludge to be buried at the landfill. And we will not allow any more waste to be dumped at the site after July when it's legally full," says Nikos Papadimas, Ano Liossia mayor.

**Dumping should not have been necessary**

High hopes were originally held for the Psyttaleia plant. It was meant to turn sewage into clean water and innocuous, dry solid cake that could be burned for energy or buried. The first two phases of separating water from solid waste and purifying the water are complete; but the final phase of drying the solid waste has lagged behind. Environment Minister George Souflias admitted last February that construction of the drying facility has suffered serious delays, even though the European Union is paying for three-quarters of the plant's 48.55 million euro construction cost. Souflias promised to complete construction by the end of 2007.

In a desperate attempt to bridge the gap for the next three years, EYDAP turned to the private sector last January, inviting businesses to take care of the sludge in any legal way possible. The underbidder, developer Christoforos Constantinides SA, won a contract to
dry the sludge *in situ* for 26 million euros.

But even this emergency plan seems to be foundering for several reasons. Constantinides has so far failed to obtain building permits for the plant and, in theory at least, is liable to lose a 1.5 million euro guarantee to EYDAP on June 15. There is European Union opposition to the interim plant; the EU objects to a nationally funded plant that duplicates an EU-funded one. Greek press reports have suggested that the EU may withdraw 30 million euros marked for the permanent plant. Finally, local authorities object to the drying technology Constantinides has proposed.

Piraeus Prefect Yannis Mihas says his area is tired of what it sees as Psyttaleia's illegal practices. "The Psyttaleia treatment installations operating on the island haven't got a permit from us as required by law. As for storing more sludge there if Ano Liossia refuses to take it, they certainly do not have a permit to store waste on the island. The local population suffers from bad odours and is increasingly complaining of health problems due to the site," he says.

Mihas doubts that the temporary solution he is so opposed to will even manage to go through the ministry of environment's own permit process. "The environment commissioner, Mr Dimas, is already examining the case of Psyttaleia and is threatening with fines. EYDAP's indifference is incomprehensible and the environment ministry is also to blame."

As if this barrage of opposition were not enough, new action by the EU's internal market directorate now looks likely to scupper EYDAP's plans for the temporary plant. The directorate wrote to Ambassador Vassilis Kaskarelis, Greece's permanent representative in Brussels, to request that Greek authorities not sign a final contract with Constantinides. The directorate is looking into whether the tender was conducted in accordance with fair competition legislation.

If the Constantinides deal falls through, EYDAP will have to start fresh negotiations with the second-lowest bidder, Anastilotili/Giovani Putignano, and yet another four-month period will likely elapse before the temporary plans are approved.

*ATHENS NEWS, 29/04/2005, page: A04*