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From The Morning Call -- April 16, 2004

State takes new tack on sinkholes

Aim is for agencies to work together on tracking complaints.

By Steve Esack
Of The Morning Call

Pennsylvania does not have an agency that catalogs and investigates all sinkhole complaints.

That soon could change.

In response to the Jan. 24 closure and dismantling of a sinkhole-damaged Route 33 bridge in Northampton County, the state Department of Environmental Protection recently began developing a department-wide sinkhole protocol, according to DEP spokesman Karl Lasher.

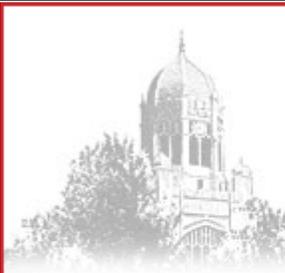
He said DEP staff held its first inhouse meeting about a week ago on possibly updating sinkhole

regulations and procedures because, aside from DEP's mining bureau, which investigates sinkholes as they may relate to mines and quarries, no other DEP office handles sinkholes. Lasher said it is too early to speculate on what changes may be made, but it could include authorizing more DEP staff to handle sinkholes or creating a clearinghouse to log sinkhole complaints.

"I imagine as part of the sinkhole discussions, much of the onus will stay on the mining program to deal with it because they are heavily involved in sinkholes," he said Thursday. "We are looking at existing regulations and whether there are possible improvements in terms of policy."

Sinkholes form naturally in porous limestone regions, over which most of the Lehigh Valley is situated. But the natural process, which can take decades or millennia to form through erosion, thawing, drought and moisture, gets accelerated by mining, development and leaky water and sewer lines.

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Although scientific studies dating to the 1950s have shown that, depending on its size, a quarry can cause sinkholes by sucking groundwater from miles away into its pit, the term "sinkhole" was not added to DEP mining regulations until 1990. That gave DEP the authority to ask quarries, often under threat of sanctions, to repair sinkholes outside their property lines.

But unlike Florida, where sinkhole reports are cataloged in the Department of Emergency Management and then ferried out to appropriate agencies for investigation, Pennsylvania does not have an agency where residents can report sinkholes. The result often has been a disjointed sinkhole probe by various state agencies. Until recently, that was the case with an investigation into why 90 sinkholes have opened since 1999 in the cement quarry region in and around the Bushkill and Schoeneck creeks, including one that is forcing PennDOT to build a new Route 33 bridge in Palmer Township.

Up until early this month the agencies had been working separately, with little communication since the investigation was announced in February. PennDOT was concentrating on sinkholes around roads and bridges. DEP's Pottsville Mining Bureau was looking at possible quarry involvement. The state Bureau of Topographic and Geologic Survey was updating its 17-year-old sinkhole maps of the region.

And state legislators, whose districts include the sinkhole region, asked Gov. Ed Rendell to appoint one agency to lead the probe.

Lasher said DEP, PennDOT and the Geologic Survey met April 7 and again on Tuesday. He said they devised a plan to identify the largest sinkholes as a way to prioritize which ones need immediate attention.

"There have definitely been meetings," said PennDOT spokesman Ron Young. "Basically everyone's communicating, I guess seeing what each individual agency can do to help with the overall problem."

State Rep. Rich Grucela, D-Northampton, said Rendell has not responded to the legislators' written request, which he added now appears moot.

"For the first time a real open line of communication is in place," said Linda Iudicello of Palmer Township, a member of the Brookwood Group homeowners association that formed after the sinkholes started several years ago. "This is the only way that short- and long-term problems can be addressed and fixed if possible."

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