
South Africa: Sappi Saiccor to expand its polluting pulp mill?

South African pulp and paper company Sappi is planning to increase the capacity of its Sappi Saiccor mill by more than 200,000 tons a year. Sappi Saiccor is the largest producer of chemical cellulose (dissolvable pulp) in the world. Its mill at Umkomaas, about 50 kilometres south of Durban Port currently produces about 600,000 tons of chemical cellulose a year. The chemical cellulose is used to produce things like cigarette filters, sweet wrappers, an additive to washing powder that stops dirt sticking to clothes and the stuff that makes vitamin tablets stick together. Almost all of Saiccor's cellulose is exported.

Saiccor (South African Industrial Cellulose Corporation Ltd) started operations in 1955, and was the first mill to produce chemical cellulose from eucalyptus. Sappi bought the company from Courtaulds (a UK chemical company) and South Africa's Industrial Development Corporation in 1988.

Sappi has hired a consulting firm, WSP Environmental, to carry out an Environmental Impact Assessment of its proposed expansion. In November 2005, WSP produced a Draft Scoping Report as part of the EIA process. Sappi hopes that construction of the project, which would cost about US\$300 million, will start in January 2007 and be finished by October 2008.

Environmental and social NGOs, including TimberWatch, groundWork and the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance, are backing local opposition to Sappi's proposed expansion.

In the Draft Scoping Report, WSP states that after the expansion, Saiccor will require an additional 2,200 tons of wood a day. At a public meeting in August, WSP's Vicki King claimed that there will be no expansion of plantations as a result of the expansion. Sappi proposes to meet this demand by diverting timber to the Saiccor mill that it currently sells to wood chip mills. This claim is disingenuous. Saiccor's expansion will increase the overall demand for wood in South Africa. This increased demand will lead to new plantations, even if these are not owned by Sappi.

On 10 November 2005, I took part in a public meeting organised by WSP. I travelled to the meeting with Wally Menne from TimberWatch and Desmond D'Sa from the South Durban Community Environmental Alliance.

When we arrived, WSP's René Abrahams was working her way through a powerpoint presentation. After about two minutes, Menne asked whether we could ask questions during the presentation, or whether we should wait until the end. Shirleigh Strydom, Sappi's hired facilitator, answered that there would be no questions during the presentation, but that Sappi's experts would be available to answer questions one to one after the presentation.

Desmond D'Sa has spent many years opposing Mondi's proposed expansion of its paper mill at Merebank. He has developed a very low tolerance of bullshit. "This is bullshit", he said. "How can this be a public meeting, when the public cannot ask questions in public?"

Strydom had little choice other than to accept this argument. He allowed us to ask questions.

During her presentation, Abrahams showed a slide which indicated that CO2 emissions from Sappi Saiccor were "not measured". Yet she concluded that after the expansion, CO2 emissions were expected to decrease. I was curious to know more about the assumptions underlying this conclusion, particularly as another of Abrahams' slides showed that the numbers of trucks, trains and cars visiting the plant would increase. The number of trucks travelling to and from the site would increase by 35 per cent, for example. I asked whether this additional traffic had been taken into account in WSP's calculations of CO2 and other emissions.

Abrahams' presentation made no mention of the increase in shipping which would be necessary to export the increased output from Saiccor. I asked why these figures had been omitted.

Abrahams answered that the CO2 emission reductions related only to on-site emissions and WSP expected that emissions would be lower because of a reduction in coal burning after the expansion of the mill. She confirmed that WSP's calculations did not take into account any emissions caused by increased traffic or shipping, either in South Africa or internationally.

Strydom, Sappi's facilitator, explained that WSP's Scoping Report was a desk study and if Sappi did not give the figures for CO2 emissions then WSP could not include the figures in their report. Further research would be carried out during the next phase of the Environmental Impact Assessment.

After the presentation, I spoke to Andrew Hall, a Project Manager at Sappi. He told me that Sappi had in fact given the figures for on-site CO2 emissions to WSP. It was WSP's decision not to include the figures in their report, he said.

CO2 emissions may not be the worst problem that Saiccor causes. But, as Desmond D'Sa pointed out during the meeting, the fact that WSP has apparently fudged the results for CO2 emissions in its Draft Scoping Report does not inspire confidence in the rest of the report.

After the meeting, a local resident thanked me for coming to the meeting. She told me of her cough which just wouldn't go away. Her husband had what he called hay fever --all year round. And recently, when she asked her son who works in the fields not far from the Saiccor mill, whether the mill smelled bad that day, he replied that he didn't know. He couldn't smell anything any more.

We left the meeting and drove past the Saiccor mill. A dozen plumes of smoke rose into the evening air. The wind was blowing in the opposite direction, but still the mill stank. Although Sappi and their hired guns, WSP Environmental, claim that the expansion will reduce emissions, they are reluctant to consider Saiccor's record of more than 50 years of pollution. Instead of expanding its operations, Sappi Saiccor should perhaps consider reparations for the damage to livelihoods and health that its operations have already caused.

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