

Contamination? What contamination?

In its July 24 edition, *The Lexington Leader* ran a lengthy front-page interview with Kayla Schnell, a business systems and communications associate with Sandow Lakes Ranch Venture LLC.

Much of the interview consisted of Schnell gushing over the grandiose plans her company and its affiliates have for Sandow Lakes Ranch.

Those plans, Schnell said, include turning the old Alcoa industrial and strip-mine site into another Woodlands. That's a reference to the upscale community on the outskirts of Houston.

(You can read the entire *Leader* story [here](#))

In the interview, Schnell discussed the 1,200-megawatt natural gas power plant SL Energy wants to build in Blue. And of course she trotted out the old 'we want to be good neighbor' line.

She was quoted as saying, "SLR wants to bring the communities up with us. It's not always about the money; it's also about the love for people and being proactive as we pave the way for the generations to come."

We'll let you decide whether Xebec, the Dallas real estate development company that owns SLR, values "the love for the people" over money.

Or whether any of the big-money Wall Street or other wealthy investors Xebec has lined up are known for an interest in anything other than their bottom line.

But what we want to address here is more serious and insidious than any financially motivated self-promotion by Sandow Lakes Ranch. In her interview, Schnell downplayed contamination issues at Sandow Lakes Ranch.

"The property is not contaminated; there are certain areas where we are limited in what we can put there," Schnell said. "But the entire property

and the lakes are not contaminated. Maybe some people are misunderstanding that there are some very small parts that Alcoa used for waste.”

That statement begs a serious response, given the seemingly serious promise to replicate The Woodlands at Sandow Lakes Ranch.

Schnell’s statement that the *entire* 33,000-acre SLR property is not contaminated may be true. But her statement that only “some very small parts” of the property were used for disposal of waste is more than just questionable.

In fact, there is substantial and credible documentation of widespread contamination on the old Alcoa property.

Which should come as no surprise, given the history of that land.

For more than 50 years, the site was home to one of the largest aluminum smelters in the world. It was powered by two coal-fired power plants that operated with virtually zero air pollution controls.

The adjacent Sandow strip mine fueled the power plants with lignite, a cheap grade of coal that contains high levels of mercury, cadmium and other heavy metals.

And those contaminants don’t just disappear when burned. They live on in the “fly ash” and “bottom ash” left after burning of lignite. If not disposed of properly, that ash can lead to soil degradation, groundwater contamination and air pollution.

Smokestacks from the two coal plants spewed out clouds of sulfur dioxide over a wide area, reaching as far as the Dallas/Fort Worth area. Additional coal plants owned and operated by TXU (later Luminant) also operated at the same site.

So, consider that history. Does it make sense, then, that only “some very small parts” of the Alcoa land was used for waste generated during six decades of strip-mining lignite, burning lignite and smelting aluminum?

Last year, the hydrologist for the Post Oak Savannah Groundwater Conservation District gave a presentation to the district board about contamination at SLR. The board had requested the hydrologist, Steve Young, address its concerns about migration of contaminated groundwater at the site.

Young kicked off his presentation by telling the district board, “There is ample contamination out there.”

His presentation included PowerPoint slides that showed seven “areas of concern” at Sandow Lakes Ranch. These were mine pits, coal ash disposal landfills, lagoons and other sites where official state and federal records showed groundwater had been impacted by a wide variety of heavy metals and other toxins. Contaminants found at those sites included benzene, cyanide, arsenic, barium, mercury, selenium, boron, chromium, lithium and radium.

In 2019, a series of reports by the Texas Tribune on coal plants in Texas investigated the condition of the Sandow Lakes Ranch property. See:

[Alcoa got Texas to approve lower cleanup standards for a coal mine | The Texas Tribune](#)

The Tribune report stated that “a review of Railroad Commission records, as well as interviews with former agency employees, indicate the mine site may not be in the immaculate condition that the marketing materials describe. The description glosses over the fact that about 70% of the 32,000 acres were once part of the strip mine, where each year the company removed enough dirt and coal to fill the Panama Canal, and buried coal ash containing toxic heavy metals under hundreds of acres.

The ‘pristine’ lakes on the property are man-made features that once collected acidic mine waste.”

Those “lakes,” by the way, are in fact abandoned mine pits.

According to experts cited in The Tribune report, heavy metals from coal ash can seep into groundwater from those mine pits, which can be several hundred feet deep.

In fact, heavy metals already have leached into at least 10 water wells on the old Alcoa property, according to a 2019 study of coal ash contamination in Texas by the Environmental Integrity Project (EIP). That study was based on official well monitoring data Alcoa and Luminant were required by the state and federal government to collect and report.

See: [Texas-Coal-Ash-Report.pdf](#)

Those 10 wells had concentrations of arsenic, mercury, cobalt, and lithium well over the federal limits for human consumption, according to the EIP report.

The EIP report states, “The groundwater around the Sandow landfill is unsafe, particularly in the upgradient wells....The upgradient wells at Sandow are contaminated. The contamination may be coming from other, unregulated coal ash disposal areas. Although the plant has been burning coal since the 1950s, the AX Landfill was only built between 2013 and 2016; coal ash generated before that time was presumably disposed of elsewhere at the site, and may be affecting onsite groundwater.”

Heavy metal contamination also was found at one coal ash dump site at the mine, and six more coal ash dump sites at the mine “are likely to be current and future sources of contamination,” according to the EIP study.

Earlier this month, another national environmental group, Earthjustice, published a new report on coal ash contamination at power plant sites

across the U.S. A coal ash disposal site at Sandow Lakes Ranch was among 45 sites mentioned in the new report.

See: [Sludge-lords: Reports from Coal Plants Reveal Vast Quantities of Toxic Coal Ash in Newly-Documented Hazardous Ponds - Earthjustice](#)

Earthjustice reviewed inspection reports of the coal ash disposal site at SLR and found chromium levels in groundwater there at two times safe levels. Lithium levels were 13 times safe levels.

All the above may be just the tip of the iceberg. For decades, Alcoa operated its smelter, coal plants and strip mine with little if any government oversight. The exact locations and amounts of coal ash and other toxic materials dumped there likely are unknown.

A former worker at one of the old TXU coal plants at the site said he and others routinely dumped transformer oil containing cancer causing PCBs directly into Alcoa Lake.

SLR officials, including Schnell, repeatedly claim that because the state Railroad Commission signed off on reclamation of the old Sandow strip mine, all contamination issues have been addressed and resolved.

But a reclamation bond is only a financial guarantee that a mining company will restore any land it mines to either the original state or to a condition stipulated in the mining contract. Release of a reclamation bond does not imply, much less guarantee, that the site is free of contamination.

And if you know much about state regulatory agencies in Texas, then you probably don't have much confidence in their diligence when it comes to protecting the environment and human health.

Over the years, Alcoa filed "certificates of remediation" in the deed records of Milam County regarding waste disposal sites at the Sandow property.

One of those, submitted to the state by Alcoa in 2001 states, “This deed certification is not a representation by the Texas Natural Resources Conservation Commission (now TCEQ) of the suitability of this land for any purpose, nor does it constitute any guarantee by the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission that the remediation standards in this certification have been met by Alcoa, Inc.”

Does that sound reassuring?

That same certificate also states that elevated concentrations of both cyanide, fluoride and sodium were detected in the groundwater at that particular disposal site. The document states, “Groundwater should not be contacted or used for any purpose without obtaining a permit and proper safety training through Alcoa, Inc...The current or future owner must undertake actions necessary to protect human health or the environment in accordance with the rules of the Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission.”

The *Lexington Leader* interview with Schnell, formerly special assistant to Lee County Judge Frank Malinak, repeated the claim that the new “Woodlands” at Sandow Lakes Ranch one day will be a place where 200,000 people might live, shop, work, recreate and vacation.

A story in this week’s *Giddings Times & News* quoted Schnell as saying one of the visions of SLR is to create a city where people will never have to leave, because there will eventually be “villages” with retail grocery stores and “everything else you need.”

That grandiose vision seems unlikely, given the environmental problems already documented at SLR and more likely to surface in the future.

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