

Mixed reactions over Oceana decision

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Hout Bay guest house owners and a group of residents who banded together to clear the air in the town have kicked up a stink after a smelly fish-meal factory backtracked on plans to relocate and instead announced it would be upping production.

While the Oceana fish meal plant's employees were relieved to hear the company had ditched a plan to relocate to St Helena Bay ("Open for business," Sentinel, November 6), residents and business people opposed to its presence in Hout Bay are far from happy.

The factory has operated in the harbour since 1957. It has now renewed its lease with the Department of Public Works for five years and confirmed its atmospheric licence with local government. It's also increasing its production days to between 120 to 180, after running at a loss of R20 million year on year over the past three years after dropping production to 60 days.

Oceana CEO Francois Kuttel said the factory would revert to its historic production pattern which is dependent on fish availability along the West Coast. This means it will typically operate from January to the end of September.

Kiara Worth of Fresh Air for Hout Bay (FAHB) – a group of residents unhappy about the smell the plant puts out – said although they understood the need for the increase in production and had always appreciated the complex nature of the situation, there was no easy solution to the problem.

FAHB believes the smell hurts business and tourism in town and compromises residents' health and well-being.

"On one of our social media sites it was described as a mixture of rotting flesh combined with raw sewage and a splash of sour, fetid vomit. We've had reports of bed and breakfast ventures losing customers because people did not want to be around such a toxic smell."

"Restaurants have had customers walk out, and some people have had to move their businesses out of the harbour area because the stench was unbearable," she said.

She believes the factory's decision to extend production is only going to make things worse.

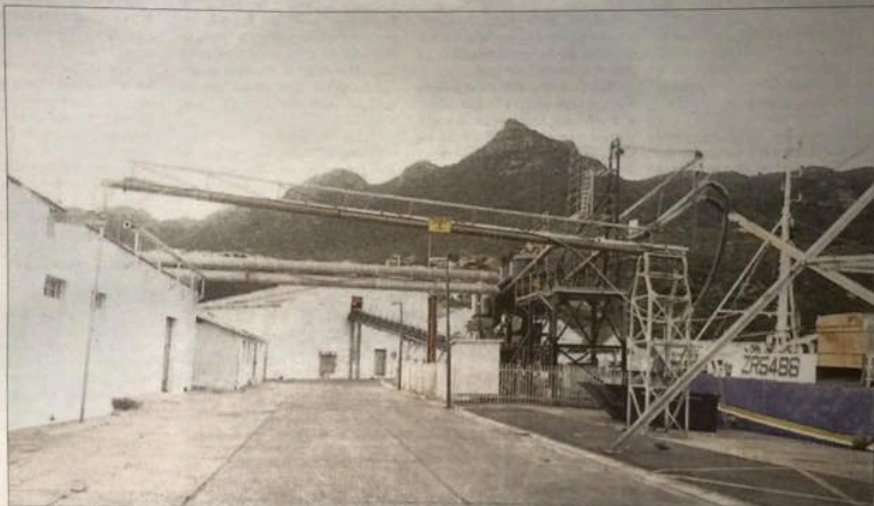
"This kind of stench for such a prolonged period impacts not only local businesses but the general well being and happiness of Hout Bay residents. The smell has a serious and negative impact on the psychology of people. Most people live in Hout Bay because they love it, and they want to be outside in our stunning environment, and not forced to barricade themselves inside their homes to escape a toxic smell."

Residents felt frustrated and powerless as they could not change the situation and this dealt a blow to Hout Bay's development, said Ms Worth.

According to the South African constitution everyone has the right to live in an environment that is conducive to their health and well-being. The Air Quality Management Act indicates that industries should not adversely affect the use and enjoyment of people's property or environment.

Since FAHB started in 2013, there had been a lot of debate in the community about the impact of the smell on people's health, said Ms Worth.

"As far as we know, no health studies have been



■ The Oceana fish meal factory, situated in the Hout Bay harbour.

conducted to determine the short or long term health effects of the smell," said Ms Worth. "People have commented on headaches, nausea, scratchy eyes and noses, as well as the exacerbation of existing illnesses, such as asthma."

Ms Worth said FAHB had seen mixed

reactions on its social media sites to Oceana's announcement that it planned to stay.

"Some people have expressed happiness at the factory remaining open. Others have suggested the entire process was an elaborate public relations stunt on the part of

Oceana, and the proposed closure was a way of eliciting support from the community to justify their continued operations.

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'I have lost more than R30 000 due to the hideous smell'

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"Many believe the decision is unethical, that money, politics and corporate gain have been placed ahead of the sustainable and positive growth of our community," she said.

However, Mr Kuttel disagreed with her statements, saying for the past 57 years, Hout Bay had developed around the factory and it had continued to grow despite the factory's operations.

"Hout Bay is a proclaimed fish-

ing harbour and is part of the government's strategy to promote economic development and job creation by better utilisation of state resources," he said.

The Hout Bay fish meal factory was the only one in South Africa to hold a final atmospheric emission licence (AEL). All others, he said, had provisional AEL licences as their odour-suppression systems were not as advanced as Oceana's.

Both the City of Cape Town and the Department of Environ-

mental Affairs and Development Planning, said Mr Kuttel, regarded the technology as being in line with international best practices. However, at the time of going to print, this could not be verified with the City of Cape Town.

"The technology includes enclosed fish pits, the extraction and collection of all production vapours and its treatment via sea water scrubbing and thereafter via chemical scrubbing or gas combustion. The smoke that is some-

times seen emanating from the stacks is as a result of boiler start-up and is typical of industrial plant operations," he said.

The Department of Environmental Affairs and Development Planning had installed a 24-hour air monitoring station at the Sentinel Primary school and "to date, it has been found that the factory emissions are well below World Health Organisations recommended limits".

But local business people aren't impressed. They fear Oceana upping production is going to lose them business.

Sandra McConkey Hayes owns the Somersby guest house in Northshore.

"The smell is hideous and very unpleasant when guests have breakfast on the patio. I have never had any guests check out due to the smell, but I constantly have to explain to them what the cause is," she said.

She believes the smell has only worsened in the two years she's been running her business, and she worries what will happen in summer when guests open their windows and spend more time outdoors.

Suegne Thomson, owner of the Seaclyffe Lodge guest house, overlooking the harbour, says it's hard to keep track of all the complaints she's had from guests.

"There are negative reviews on Trip Advisor and many of my guests

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checked out before the last day of their booking," she said. That's a problem, because she can't charge guests for days they haven't stayed.

"To date, I have lost more than R30 000 due to the hideous smell," she said.

Both she and Ms McConkey Hayes are dreading the increased production at the factory.

June Kruger, owner of Amblewood Guest House in Scott Estate, diagonally across from the factory, said although the smell was very unpleasant, it had not affected her business. However, she said, that could change with an increase in production days.

"When guests sit on our deck during production times it does affect them as it is very unpleasant, but no one has left due to the smell."

Joy Termorshuizen, co-owner of Sea Cape Rentals and Sales, which specialises in residential and holiday rentals, said they had been operating in Hout Bay for 20 years and business had definitely been affected by the smell.

"We mainly work with an overseas market and I get numerous complaints about the stench every year," she said.

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