Why the haste on landfill near Rahway River?: Editorial

For months, environmentalists have been mud-wrestling with the Christie administration over a small piece of land along the Rahway River in Carteret, now a contaminated field of sludge lagoons.

The administration is suspiciously eager to push for a giant landfill at the site, built with petroleum-contaminated soil and covered with a cap. They argue it will seal contaminants inside, protecting the river without aggravating flooding in the region.

But environmentalists have raised red flags, both about the project and the administration’s rush to approve it. They argue that placing a giant cap on most of the 125-acre site will aggravate flooding in the river and cause even more pollutants to seep out.

Pardon our skepticism, but it is tough to trust this administration when it comes to environmental questions, given the record. Christie has marched backward on climate change, called a cease-fire in the war on Midwest coal and raided nearly $1 billion from green energy funds.

And why the haste? The Department of Environmental Protection has already issued a conditional approval, an unusual move at this stage, even though some staffers at the DEP share the concern of credible environmental groups such as New York/New Jersey Baykeeper.

Now, the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has agreed to study the flooding impact of the project at federal expense. It expects to finish by February.

Obviously, the rational move is to put this project on hold until that federal study is done. Yet the DEP says it will not wait. Spokesman Larry Ragonese claims the issue has already been studied by the state and there is no flooding problem. "There’s no need for the study," he said, "therefore, why would we hold the project up?"

Ragonese notes that a statutory clock is ticking on land use permits for the project. But the DEP’s first job is to protect this river, not ensure a speedy approval for the private firm that wants to build the landfill or the private parties that own the land.

As it happens, one of the owners of the land is Paul Weiner, the law partner of Sen. Ray Lesniak (D-Union).
The private company that would build the landfill, Soil Safe, was previously represented by Sen. Bob Smith (D-Middlesex), the chairman of the Environment and Energy Committee. And the firm has worked in the past with Senate President Stephen Sweeney (D-Gloucester).

Those relationships are not spoilers. Even politically connected players deserve a fair hearing. But this is New Jersey, and projects with political strings attached deserve an extra measure of scrutiny, especially when the DEP is rushing to proceed before getting the best information on flooding.

And while we’re waiting for that study, why not also hold a public hearing to examine the impact on air quality? The air permit, issued at the DEP’s discretion, is one of the last approvals needed for this project. It would allow for up to 200 diesel trucks a day, Ragonese says.

As the feds use these next few months to study flooding, let’s take a closer look at that issue, too.

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