

Press release: Bristol company fined for hazardous waste offences

They were fined for illegally supplying thousands of tonnes of hazardous waste to a development site in Avonmouth.

The sentencing follows a 5 year Environment Agency investigation into Churngold Recycling Ltd and 2 of its directors, John Barcham and Lee Phelan. Codenamed 'Operation Durable', the investigation culminated in a 9 week trial at Bristol Crown Court earlier this year.

Churngold operated a waste transfer site at Hallen Yard on the Severn View Industrial Estate, Avonmouth, where it supplied soil and aggregate for the building industry. Waste was collected from sites across the UK and stored and treated at Hallen Yard.

The company operated under a waste management licence, issued by the Environment Agency. This controlled the types of waste accepted at the transfer station and the activities permitted at the site.

In June 2011, Churngold was awarded a contract to remove hazardous waste from a site in Oxford where the car company, BMW, discovered extensive contamination under a building during re-developing its Cowley factory. Trial pits and testing revealed high levels of heavy metals, hydrocarbons and asbestos contaminated materials.

Churngold was paid £750 per load to remove the hazardous waste to its yard in Avonmouth for treatment prior to it being used as a building material. Between July to September 2011, a total of 31,000 tonnes of waste was brought from Cowley to Churngold's waste transfer station in Avonmouth. The volume of waste kept increasing and very quickly exceeded the transfer station's limit of 6,000 tonnes.

Around the same time, Churngold was awarded a contract to supply 60,000 tonnes of aggregate to the site of a new Co-operative supermarket distribution centre at Cabot Park, Avonmouth. The aggregate would be mixed with inert material that had gone through a 'stabilisation process' making it suitable for use as a building material.

On 7 September 2011 Churngold delivered the first load to the Co-op site. Over the next fortnight it transported a total of 64,000 tonnes (2,751 loads) to the new distribution centre site.

Ground-workers at the Co-op site said the Churngold material gave them 'runny and sore eyes'. One worker said it smelt like 'faeces and bleach' and 'took his breath away.' Others described the clay-like material as 'smelling like a hospital'.

Waste from the BMW site in Oxford had undergone partial treatment to remove asbestos materials, but some asbestos remained and it was still hazardous

when it arrived at the Churngold's Hallen Yard in Avonmouth. The company was told the waste required further treatment.

As operations manager, Lee Phelan would have been fully aware of the requirements of the transfer station's permit conditions. Failure by Churngold to fully treat the waste, potentially exposed staff and visitors to Hallen Yard and ground-workers at the Co-op site to health risks from the asbestos.

Churngold's environment manager became concerned after discovering the hazardous nature of the BMW car plant waste. She told Barcham and Phelan it was 'untreatable'. They repeatedly ignored her warnings.

On 22 September 2011 a former Churngold employee notified the Co-op that contaminated material had been delivered to their new distribution centre at Cabot Park. Subsequent analysis revealed the presence of asbestos in 47 of 60 samples, high levels of total petroleum hydrocarbons (TPH), polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAH) as well as significant levels of leachable lead, cyanide, copper, antimony and total sulphate concentrations that posed a risk to groundwater and nearby watercourses.

Barcham was described as a 'domineering character' who liked to micro manage. Nothing would happen without his say so or knowledge including where treated waste went after treatment. He once told the company's environment manager, 'We don't tell the EA what we are doing, we do it and then tell them how we've done it.'

The company failed to inform the Environment Agency of the massive amount of hazardous material being stockpiled at Hallen Yard or where it had come from. The sheer volume of materials arriving at the site made it impossible to segregate or treat them properly. This caused the site to breach its permit.

The Environment Agency had earlier advised Churngold that waste containing heavy metals remains hazardous even after it has undergone a stabilisation process. The court heard that while Phelan had worked in the waste industry, he had no qualifications or experience of treating hazardous waste.

Work on the Co-op site was suspended on 1 December 2011 following publication of the analysis report. The Environment Agency confirmed the material was illegally deposited hazardous waste and that it should be removed to a suitable waste facility for safe disposal.

The Environment Agency investigation revealed that Churngold had also illegally disposed of hazardous waste including asbestos, railway sleepers, plastic, metal pipes, vehicle tyres and foam pipe lagging at a second site, Minors Farm, Severnside.

Adrian Evans, for the Environment Agency, said:

Hazardous waste must be handled and treated with great care to safeguard human health and the environment. This case shows the Environment Agency will take serious action against people who fail

to comply with the law.

Churngold Recycling Ltd had a culture where commercial gain was given priority over environmental protection. We hope this prosecution sends out a strong deterrent message to others who flout the law.

Churngold Recycling Limited, John Barcham and Lee Phelan faced a total of 10 charges under the Environment Protection Act 1990 and Environmental Permitting Regulations 2010 at a 9 week trial that started in May 2017.

Judge James Patrick QC said “the treatment of the waste was unscientific and amateur” and that the defendants showed a “flagrant disregard for the law”.

The company was found guilty of 4 offences. John Barcham was found guilty of 1 offence and Lee Phelan convicted of 3 offences. There were 3 not guilty verdicts and the jury failed to reach a verdict on the 2 remaining charges.

The judge praised the Environment Agency for the quality of their professional investigation.

Summary of convictions:

Churngold Recycling Ltd:

- Between 1 July to 31 December 2011, failed to comply with conditions of permit at Hallen Yard, Avonmouth, an offence under Reg 38(2) under the Environmental Permitting Regulations: £12,000 fine
- Between 1 September to 31 September 2011, deposited controlled waste at the Co-operative Site, Cabot Park, Avonmouth without a permit contrary to Section 33(1)(a) and 33(6) of the Environmental Protection Act 1990: £3,000 fine
- Between 1 January to 31 December 2011, treated, kept or disposed of controlled waste in a manner likely to cause pollution or harm to human health contrary to Sections 33(1)(a) and 33(6) of the Environmental Protection Act 1990: £5,000 fine
- Between 1 June to 31 December 2011, deposited controlled waste at Minors Farms, Hallen, Bristol contrary to Section 33(1)(a) and 33(6) of the Environmental Protection Act 1990: £2,450 fine

John Barcham:

- Between 1 July to 31 December 2011, failed to comply with, or contravention of, a Waste Management Permit condition contrary to Regulation 38(2) of the Environmental Permitting Regulations 2010: 6 months suspended for 12 months and costs of £10,000
- John Barcham ordered to carry out 75 hours of unpaid work

Lee Phelan:

- Between 1 July to 31 December 2011, failed to comply with, or contravention of, a Waste Management Permit condition contrary to

Regulation 38(2) of the Environmental Permitting Regulations 2010: 6 months suspended for 12 months

- Between 1 September and 30 September 2011, deposited controlled waste on land without a permit contrary to Section 33(1)(a) and 33(6) of the Environmental Protection Act 1990: 1 month suspended for 12 months
- Between 1 January to 31 December 2011, treated, kept or disposed of controlled waste in a manner likely to cause pollution of the environment or harm to human health contrary to Section 33(1)(c) and 33(6) of the Environmental Protection Act 1990: 1 month suspended for 12 months
- Lee Phelan ordered to carry out 100 hours unpaid work