Artifacts Found On Site For IA Fertilizer Plant

Ryan J. Foley, Associated Press

IOWA CITY, Iowa (AP) — An Egyptian company planning to invest $1.4 billion to build a fertilizer plant in southeastern Iowa may have to pay for archaeological digging at the site because Native American artifacts were found there, the state archaeologist said Wednesday.

Artifacts such as pottery, stone tools and spear points that are likely between 1,000 and 1,600 years old have been found in clusters on the 300-acre site north of Burlington where Orascom Construction Industries hopes to break ground soon, State Archaeologist John Doershuk said in an interview. The discovery adds another layer of complexity — and potential controversy — to a project that has been criticized because it's been promised more than $200 million in state and local tax subsidies.

A consultant hired by Orascom is conducting additional analysis of the land and will recommend whether any of the areas are eligible for the National Register for Historic Places. If any areas are eligible, Orascom would be required to pay for "a full-blown excavation" before building on them to allow archaeologists to recover anything of significance, Doershuk said.

Doershuk said that his office and the State Historic Preservation Office would get to offer input on the findings before any decisions are made. He said he hopes the issue does not cause construction delays, but it's too soon to say how it might affect the plans.

Work could begin elsewhere on the property while archaeologists dig in affected areas, but the impact would "depend on where they sit within the footprint of that construction," he said.

"From what I've learned so far, I wouldn't be surprised if one or two of these site areas get designated as eligible," he said. "But I'm still waiting for the full data so I can add my two cents."

The pottery and tools recovered thus far aren't particularly significant since similar items have been found before, he said. But the additional sampling and evaluation being conducted by Orascom's consultant, the Louis Berger Group, Inc., is looking at whether the areas are potentially significant because of the amount of materials clustered and how they are preserved. Perhaps they will find the remnants of a house or an "activity area" where people cooked food or processed hides, he said.

"If those kinds of things are intact, then the artifacts start to tell us a lot about the life of the people," he said. "That's what they are trying to drill into right now."

He said no human or animal bones have been found on the site, which had not been

studied by archaeologists previously. It's still unclear whether researchers will be able to trace artifacts back to a specific tribe, he said.

Workers at the State Historic Preservation Office have been in contact with the company about the site, and are waiting to provide their input on the findings and offer technical assistance, a spokesman said.

Samantha Kampman, a public relations representative for Orascom, said the company hired the consultant to study the archaeological significance of the land because that is required as part of its application for a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers permit to build on wetlands. She downplayed any problems, saying: "Everything is running according to schedule."

The plant would employ 165 full-time workers after production begins in 2015 and support more than 2,000 temporary construction jobs, state officials say. Supporters say it would save money for farmers by reducing the cost of fertilizer and provide a needed economic jolt to the region. Critics say the tax breaks are too generous, especially for a large, foreign company, and that they are concerned about the plant's environmental impact.

A spokeswoman for Louis Berger, which is expected to complete its report in coming days, had no immediate comment. Doershuk said the consultant has done extensive testing in January and February, which is unusual given the cold weather, after officials determined that "select areas had research potential and needed further study" before the permit would be approved.

He praised Orascom for working with regulators and following the process as it's supposed to work.

"They have chosen to cooperate, which is wonderful and really speeds things along," he said. "These folks are being smart about it."

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