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Darling 'choking on factory dust'

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Darling residents are angry about billowing clouds of dust pollution from a new factory that has caused school pupils to have to wear masks.

Doctors in the area say they have noticed an increase in respiratory ailments since the factory started operating, while the Malmesbury municipality has resorted to taking the factory owners to court.

But the factory owners say the dust is not toxic and the residents have "got their knickers in a knot".

The factory, Mortar SA Pty Ltd, produces ready-mixed mortar.

Artist and Darling resident Nicolas Maritz said the factory was close to the sub-economic housing and to farmland.

"It spews out a white billowing cloud that sweeps across the town. It creates dust that is terrible. At the school they once had to get masks for the pupils. It is unacceptable.

"It started in October last year and there has been a constant battle between them and the Darling community and the municipality.

"The municipality says the factory has been erected illegally. How does a person put up a two-storey factory without the municipality noticing?

"You cannot set up a business which constitutes a health hazard," Maritz said.

Resident Shaun McLaughlin said the dust was also likely to affect tourism, particularly the Darling wildflower show.

Darling doctor Wessel Roets said, although he did not have objective data, it was his opinion and that of his two partners that there had been an increase in the incidence of respiratory ailments since the factory had begun discharging dust.

"We are seeing more cases of sinusitis and rhinitis, and we are seeing people with chronic respiratory disorders more frequently," Roets said.

He said if the dust contained silica, it could lead to people developing silicosis later.

Joggie Scholtz, director of corporate services for Malmesbury municipality, said the factory had been built illegally and the municipality had found out about it only when the public complained. They had tried to close it down, unsuccessfully. This led to the municipality taking legal action.

"I still cannot believe it is so difficult to stop people acting illegally, especially when the public's health is at risk," an exasperated Scholtz said.

The municipality tried to get an urgent interdict from the Cape High Court on June 7 to compel the factory to stop operating, but the judge said she was not convinced the issue was urgent. It has been set down for August 29.

Until then, the owner had agreed to operate twice a week. Specialists have been appointed to test the dust emissions.



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Factory owner Robert Wolffs says the factory was built legally.

"This is new machinery and the engineers didn't tell us there would be dust," Wolffs said.

They had made alterations which had brought the dust under control. There was no silica in the dust, which was not toxic, merely "of nuisance value", he said.