

UK's leading four producers under scrutiny of Brussels-based Cartel Damage Claims

Competition investigator looks at cement supply

By PAUL THOMPSON

BELGIAN cartel-busters are looking into claims that the UK cement market is being unfairly controlled by leading suppliers.

Independent quarriers and ready mixed concrete suppliers have called in investigators from Brussels-based Cartel Damage Claims to look into cement supply problems and sky-high prices.

They will sift through complaints that the supply of ordinary Portland cement in the UK is unfairly

dominated by the largest global suppliers.

Independents have long voiced concerns over the stranglehold large producers have on the UK market but the latest move has been prompted by the current cement drought, first revealed by *Construction News*.

Industry body the British Aggregates Association has put its weight behind the investigation and called for any companies that had experienced high prices and supply difficulties to contact it.

BAA director Robert Durward said: "We have heard reports of independent companies experiencing difficulties in getting competitive prices for cement. The ready mixed concrete sector has experienced the biggest problems but the precast sector is also being hit by high prices and supply difficulties.

"This raises a number of competition issues and we have brought in CDC to investigate the matter."

Four manufacturers – Cemex, Lafarge Cement, Castle Cement and Buxton Lime Industries – sup-

ply most of the cement in the UK. All have been struggling to fill customers orders due to high demand, seasonal maintenance shut-downs and technical problems at Lafarge's Hope cement works in Derbyshire and its Northfleet plant in Kent.

CDC is currently claiming over £135 million compensation for 29 companies hit by a price-fixing cement cartel in Germany. The four manufacturers were unavailable to comment through trade body the British Cement Association.

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Government proposes forcing firms to supply environmental impact information

Quarriers blast plans for green assessment

By PAUL THOMPSON

QUARRIERS have labelled efforts to force operators to carry out environmental impact assessments on their sites "heavy-handed" and "Draconian".

They claimed that a Government move to force quarry operators into supplying environmental information within a three month time frame in an effort to clear a log-jam of stalled mineral mining permissions was not needed.

The claim came in a reply to consultation on the application of the Environmental

Impact Assessment Directive to stalled reviews of old mineral permissions and periodic reviews of mineral permissions in England by the Department for Communities and Local Government. Industry body the British Aggregates Association said there was no need for statutory provision to require environmental information to be provided for reviews.

The consultation document cited 41 planning permission cases throughout England that had stalled, thanks, its authors claimed, to operators failing to provide enough information on the environmental impact that

quarrying work could have.

But BAA secretary Peter Huxtable claimed that operators were not to blame in most stalled cases and pointed the finger at planning authorities.

He said: "On the limited checks we have made on the stalled cases it is not as clear cut as to the reasons why progress has not taken place. In several cases it is clearly due to individual planning authorities."

Mr Huxtable pointed out that most of the cases involved just three planning authorities – Dorset, the Peak District and Staffordshire.

He said: "Almost 70 per cent

of the 41 cases involve three authorities.

"We could not support denial of consents or compensation in instances where permissions are revoked due to failures by the authorities to act in a reasonable manner.

"We believe progress is being made on the 'stalled' cases and believe the measures are unnecessary."

The consultation, which closed last week, hopes to speed up the mineral planning permission process when operators apply to extend existing extraction permissions.

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