

Illinois EPA conceals environmental health hazards from thousands

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On Chicago's predominantly working class South and West sides sit many of the city's industrial plants from which smoke and toxins infiltrate the air and, in many instances, the soil of those living nearby, some just feet away. On numerous occasions, city residents have complained and pleaded for the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to regulate what is pumped out of them and to stop the construction of new plants in residential areas.

The health risk associated with air pollution is enormous. According to the American Lung Association, it increases the risk of "premature death and other serious health effects such as lung cancer, asthma attacks, cardiovascular damage, and developmental and reproductive harm."

Asthma hospitalization rates in Chicago are twice the national average of the United States.

Facing public pressure, a so-called "environmental justice" policy was put in place in the 1990s.

After the EPA receives a construction permit request from a business, the EPA determines within ninety days to issue the permit. During this time, the EPA will notify elected officials and community organizations if the area where the permit is seeking construction resides within a minority or low-income population twice the statewide average.

However, a recent report from the *Chicago Tribune* found the EPA has done little to nothing to inform residents of the construction of new plants. According to the *Tribune*, nearly 2,000 permits for construction were filed as complete between January 2015 and August 2018 in the EPA's environmental justice outreach database. In other words, the EPA marks these as having notified residents of some 2,000 construction projects which would be taking place in their neighborhood.

Tribune states, for over half of the cases, notification letter was not sent. Among those sent, some 80 of those were given the minimum allotted time to respond of two weeks.

In July of this year, MAT Asphalt began producing asphalt in Chicago's working class McKinley Park neighborhood on the southwest side. The EPA received the permit request in July 2017 but informed residents just two weeks before the plant began operations.

The plant is adjacent to a popular park where families and friends gather to socialize. Asphalt plants are known to produce fine particles which can cause breathing problems. They are also known to produce benzene, which has been linked to leukemia.

While the owner of MAT Asphalt stated the plant uses new techniques to reduce the release of harmful substances, Dr. Lynn Goldman, a dean at the Milken Institute School of Public Health at George Washington University, told the *Tribune*, "Even when facilities don't work with toxic materials, just the traffic alone is creating a hazard. Think about trash transfer, big lots for school buses and delivery trucks. If these trucks are lining up and idling, they can really create a hotspot of air pollution."

Like many major cities in the United States and the world, Chicago confronts a staggering environmental health crisis, of which the working class bears the brunt.

The environmental advocacy Natural Resources Defense Council reported in October that Chicago's poor and working class West and South sides are exposed to the greatest levels of toxic air pollution and other environmental health toxins in the city. The findings were based on eleven environmental guidelines defined by the EPA, including toxic air and water pollution, lead paint exposure, vehicle traffic and

nearness to hazardous waste.

In April, the American Lung Association published their 2018 State of the Air Report and gave Chicago a grade of “F” for air pollution due to an increase of “unhealthy ozone pollution days” rising from last year’s 18 to 28. Chicago is now the 22nd most polluted city in the United States, worse than last year’s 26th ranking.

The EPA has consistently paved the way for businesses in Chicago and Illinois to buy up the cheapest lands, often in poor and working class neighborhoods, and allow the building of toxic spewing plants all with little oversight. At the same time, it has concealed from public view enormous health risks from already operating plants.

In August, the EPA informed residents of Willowbrook, some thirty-five miles southwest of Chicago, that the Willowbrook-based medical sterilization Sterigenics plant, was releasing cancer-causing ethylene oxide into the air.

The *Tribune* reported: “Long-term exposure to ethylene oxide can irritate the eyes, skin, nose, throat, and lungs, and harm the brain and nervous system (causing effects such as headaches, memory loss, numbness). Studies show that breathing air containing elevated ethylene oxide levels over many years increases the risk of some types of cancers, including cancers of the white blood cells (such as non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, myeloma and lymphocytic leukemia); and breast cancer in females.”

Some 19,000 people live within one mile of the plant. The EPA estimated that chance those living in one census tract near the plant will contract cancer is more than nine times the national average.

In October, the *Tribune* reported the EPA along with Illinois Governor Bruce Rauner and the Trump administration knew about the about the high cancer risks of the Sterigenics plant in December 2017 but said nothing. A private equity firm co-founded by Rauner has owned Sterigenics since 2011. Rauner left the firm in 2012 to run for governor.

A December 22, 2017 letter, obtained by the *Tribune*, from leading EPA official Ed Nam to a Sterigenics executive and Julie Armitage, the Illinois EPA chief air bureau, confirmed they knew of the plant’s cancer risks.

“EPA has calculated a cancer risk of approximately

1,000 in a million at the nearest residence, exceeding our typical upper limit of cancer risk acceptability,” wrote Nam. “EPA would like to provide Sterigenics with the opportunity to review our modeling and to suggest improvements for accuracy.”

The EPA ordered Sterigenics to temporarily halt production in October.

In November, the Illinois EPA revealed two more plants are releasing cancer-causing pollutants. Medline Industries, in the northern Illinois city of Waukegan, releases the same ethylene oxide as Sterigenics with some 19,000 people, the EPA reports, living within the cancer risk zone near it.

Vantage Specialty Chemicals in Gurnee, also in northern Illinois, released 6,412 pounds of ethylene oxide into the air in 2014, more than Sterigenics or Medline during the same time. Approximately 24,000 people live within the high risk cancer zone of the plant.

The EPA, again, knew well in advance but said nothing.



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