



PRESS-REGISTER

Residents claim bad air drifts from industrial plants

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Armed with data gathered by a scientist from Louisiana and an environmental group from Colorado, residents living on the outskirts of Monroeville say they have proof that plumes of hazardous gases are enveloping their homes and neighborhoods.

State agencies, however, said they conducted thorough testing and discovered no problems.

State toxicologist Neil Sass said the Alabama Department of Environmental Management "checked wells, water in the toilet tanks and didn't find anything."

The data collected in Monroe, Conecuh and Escambia counties by the environmental groups suggests that elevated levels of hydrogen sulfide and a variety of volatile organic compounds are found in neighborhoods near a Monroeville gas-processing facility and local wood treatment operations.

Hydrogen sulfide produces a "rotten egg" odor often associated with swamps, wood pulping operations and natural gas deposits in south Alabama.

It can be lethal at high concentrations, though scientists are uncertain what health effects can be expected at the much lower concentrations reported outside some homes in Monroe County.

Wilma Subra, the scientist involved with the recent air monitoring report, said wood treatment plants, in addition to the dozens of small gas wells and refineries between Brewton and Monroeville, appear to be a potent source of hydrogen sulfide for nearby residents.

The gas facilities, Subra said, may be improperly and incompletely burning various waste gases associated with drilling and refining natural gas.

Subra is president of a

Louisiana-based chemical analysis company noted for doing free environmental testing for people living near industrial areas. Subra said the data she gathered shows that air quality in some residential areas near Monroeville might be considered unsafe for short- or long-term exposure under federal standards from the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.

Subra acknowledged she did not have the funding to do the kind of long-term monitoring typically used to determine airborne health risks. But, she said, the data she collected are accurate and strongly suggest there's a problem that warrants further study.

While ADEM declined to test the air around Monroeville -- writing in a June 2005 letter to one local resident that such air testing would be too costly to undertake -- Subra and the Oil and Gas Accountability Project, based in Colorado, conducted five days' worth of testing in the area in August 2005.

ADEM spokesman Scott Hughes said, "We received several complaints from that area. We have expended

a tremendous amount of resources in that area. We collected groundwater samples from residences, we've sent air people on routine patrols to look for issues. Every time we've been down there, we have not documented any type of environmental concern."

Sass, the state toxicologist, said that state testing has already proved there are no health risks for anyone living in the area. "The data don't show anything. We did an epidemiological study of the Old Stage Road area and found no health effects."

Thomas McKenzie Jr., born and raised in Monroeville, left the area last year and moved to Sturgeon Bay, Wis., because he said he believes the air and water in Monroeville are unsafe. He said his doctors believe that exposure to both hydrogen sulfide and volatile organic compounds, or VOCs, are to blame for the range of symptoms he suffers from.

McKenzie was dismissive of ADEM's testing attempts. He said the state agency tested his water and found nothing wrong about the same time that a federally accredited private testing lab found excessive levels of petroleum-based chemicals related to oil and gas drilling in his water. He provided the lab results to the Press-Register.

McKenzie said he believes the chemicals in his water in 2004 were related to drilling activities going on at that time.

He said of ADEM, "They sent some air inspectors down here and had them drive around and sniff with their noses. Guess what? They didn't smell a problem. ... ADEM hasn't found a problem in Alabama ever if it would get in the way of somebody's business."

In a letter to McKenzie, who requested that ADEM monitor hydrogen sulfide levels in the air, Timothy Owen, with ADEM's air division, wrote that there were no federal or state air quality standards for the gas, and air testing in Monroeville would be too expensive.

Typically, hydrogen sulfide is stripped out of natural gas during the refining process and then burned off. Levels of about 1,000 parts per million are fatal, with concentrations of about 500 parts per million knocking people out within seconds, according to federal studies.

A man was killed as a result of exposure to hydrogen sulfide at a Mobile refinery several years ago, and three Choctaw County paper mill workers were killed in 2002. Such exposures happen almost exclusively in industrial settings and would not be expected to occur in a residential neighborhood.

The levels reported around people's homes in Subra's study were much lower; the highest level measured was 2.6 parts per million. But even that level is about 40 times higher than federal officials consider safe for chronic exposure.

Studies have linked chronic low-level exposure to symptoms including fatigue, depression, memory loss, balance problems, anxiety, migranes, dizziness, tremors, anger, inability to distinguish colors, respiratory problems and eye, ear, nose and throat problems.

The data collected shows that the highest levels of hydrogen sulfide were found in neighborhoods downwind of gas refineries and pulp mills.

While state officials appear unlikely to pursue further testing, a formal petition was submitted to the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry on Monday by environmental attorney David Ludder. Formerly the chief lawyer at ADEM, Ludder said the petition presents Subra's Alabama data and asks the federal agency to investigate.