

# EPA proposal takes on health risks near US chemical plants

April 6 2023, by Michael Phillis

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The Fifth Ward Elementary School and residential neighborhoods sit near the Denka Performance Elastomer Plant, back, in Reserve, La., Sept. 23, 2022. In what could prove a significant move for communities facing air pollution, the Environmental Protection Agency proposed on Thursday, April 6, 2023, that chemical plants nationwide measure certain hazardous compounds that cross beyond their property lines and reduce them when they are too high. Credit: AP Photo/Gerald Herbert, File

In what could prove a significant move for communities facing air pollution, the Environmental Protection Agency proposed on Thursday that chemical plants nationwide measure certain hazardous compounds that cross beyond their property lines and reduce them when they are too high.

The proposed rules would reduce cancer risk and other exposure for communities that live close to harmful emitters, the EPA said. The data would be made public and the results would force companies to fix problems that increase emissions.

"This is probably the most significant rule I'm experiencing in my 30 years of working in cancer alley," said Beverly Wright, executive director of the Deep South Center for Environmental Justice and a member of the White House Environmental Justice Advisory Council. She referred to an area dense with petrochemical development along the Gulf Coast.

In the past, Wright said, even when emissions caused harm, residents weren't able to sue and reduce the threat.

The proposed measure is also intended to address short-term emissions spikes when plants start up, shut down and malfunction. If the proposal is finalized, it would impact roughly 200 chemical plants, the agency said.

Fence-line monitoring has long been a priority of the environmental justice movement and a number of refinery communities have won it in recent years. This measure would extend some of those changes nationwide.

EPA Administrator Michael Regan announced the plan in St. John the Baptist Parish, Louisiana. It is home to the Denka chemical plant, which

makes synthetic rubber and emits chloroprene, listed as a carcinogen in California. Denka is less than a half-mile from an elementary school and has been targeted by federal officials for allegedly increasing the cancer risk for the nearby, majority-Black community.

"For generations, our most vulnerable communities have unjustly borne the burden of breathing unsafe, polluted air," Regan said.

Data show the plant has drastically reduced its emissions over time and it already conducts fence-line monitoring.

A statement provided by Denka Performance Elastomer said that the cancer risk of chloroprene has been overstated and that it has pushed the EPA to reevaluate its risk assessment.



EPA Administrator Michael Regan, left, arrives at the Fifth Ward Elementary School, which is near the Denka plant, with Robert Taylor, second left, founder of Concerned Citizens of St. John's Parish, and Lydia Gerard, third left, a member of the group, in Reserve, La., Nov. 16, 2021. In what could prove a significant move for communities facing air pollution, the Environmental Protection Agency proposed on Thursday, April 6, 2023, that chemical plants nationwide measure certain hazardous compounds that cross beyond their property lines and reduce them when they are too high. Credit: AP Photo/Gerald Herbert, File

"The people of St. John the Baptist Parish deserve current and accurate scientific information regarding the health risks in their community," said Denka Executive Officer and Plant Manager Jorge Lavastida.

In documents, EPA said the plant remains a danger to those who live nearby.

The changes also focus on manufacturers of ethylene oxide, which is commonly used in medical sterilization plants. Long-term exposure to that chemical can increase the risk of lymphoma and breast cancer. The agency plans to issue proposed regulations for medical sterilization plants in the near future.

The proposal would slash ethylene oxide emissions nationwide by about two-thirds and chloroprene by three-quarters from 2020 levels, according to the agency. Emissions that worsen smog would be reduced as well.

The American Chemistry Council said industry emissions have declined over the last decade. It is concerned about the EPA's proposal for reducing ethylene oxide, and says it is based on a faulty EPA risk

assessment.

"Overly conservative regulations on ethylene oxide could threaten access to products ranging from electric vehicle batteries to sterilized medical equipment," said council spokesman Tom Flanagan, adding that the EPA may be rushing its work on significant regulations.

Regan visited this same parish in 2021 on a five-day trip from Mississippi to Texas to highlight low-income and mostly minority communities harmed by industrial pollution.

Then last year, the EPA said it had evidence that Black residents face an increased cancer risk from the Denka chemical plant and state officials were allowing pollution to remain too high. The agency's letter was part of an investigation under the Civil Rights Act of 1964, which says anyone who received federal funds cannot discriminate based on race or national origin.

Next, federal officials sued Denka in February, demanding it cut its emissions. Now, they've proposed tighter regulations on chemical plants.

"This is a day to celebrate," Wright said.

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