

EPA to test air outside schools, but has largely ignoring its peer-reviewed screening tool

7 April 2009, By Michael Hawthorne and Darnell Little

After ignoring its own research for most of the last decade, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency this spring will test the air outside dozens of schools across the nation that are close to industrial polluters.

A Chicago Tribune analysis of the data being used by the EPA shows that several area schools are near factories that emit [toxic chemicals](#) and [heavy metals](#) linked to cancer and other health problems. Yet this is the first time the agency has systematically followed through with more extensive testing of [air](#) quality around schools.

Lisa Jackson, the new EPA administrator, promised during her confirmation hearings to take a closer look. Under a plan outlined last week by the agency, air samples will be collected for about two months outside 62 schools, most of which are near large factories in 22 states.

The tests will provide a snapshot of air pollution breathed in by children, who generally are more susceptible to toxic chemicals than adults.

"As a mother, I understand that concerned parents deserve this information as quickly as we can gather and analyze it," Jackson said in a statement.

Schools were selected in part from the results of EPA research that assesses the relative health risks of air pollution. The database combines industry-supplied emissions data, rankings of the health dangers posed by chemicals and heavy metals, how the pollution spreads in the air and how many people live nearby.

Agency scientists spent millions of taxpayer dollars creating the database to help identify factories and neighborhoods that deserve more intense scrutiny.

However, a Tribune investigation last summer found the EPA has largely ignored its peer-reviewed screening tool.

In its own analysis of the EPA's data, the newspaper found that people living in Chicago and nearby suburbs face some of the highest risks in the nation for cancer, lung disease and other ailments linked to industrial pollution.

The factory with the highest risk score in Chicago is the A. Finkl & Sons steel mill on the edge of Lincoln Park, three blocks from St. Josaphat School, one of the spots where the EPA will be testing the air this spring.

Company executives promote a green image -- a sign stretching across Cortland Street boasts that Finkl has planted 5 million trees -- but the chromium, lead, manganese and other heavy metals churned into the air by the mill are responsible for nearly a third of the city's total health risk from factory pollution.

The EPA cautions that its screening tool can't tell whether people will actually get sick from breathing the pollution. Moreover, the emissions generally are legal under federal laws and regulations.

At the same time, a growing amount of research shows that dirty air is more dangerous than previously thought, and federal officials acknowledge that regulations don't address the cumulative risk posed by multiple polluters.

Two other factories with some of the nation's highest risk scores are close to St. Josaphat: Horween Leather Co. and Sipi Metals Corp.

Parents were informed last week that the EPA will be setting up testing equipment outside the school.

The monitors will test for heavy metals and toxic chemicals, including benzene, chromium, lead and manganese.

School officials and several parents referred inquiries to the Chicago archdiocese. "This is an issue for the entire neighborhood," said Colleen Dolan, a spokeswoman.

It also is an issue for other parts of Chicago and the collar counties, especially suburban Cook. Throughout the region, 42 public schools and 18 private schools are within a half-mile of a factory that ranks in the top 10 percent of polluters nationwide, according to a Tribune analysis.

That can be attributed in part to the region's gritty industrial history of factories operating close to residential neighborhoods.

Walker Elementary School in suburban Bedford Park is two blocks from the sprawling Corn Products International refinery, which has one of the nation's highest risk scores. In the process of turning corn into starches and sweeteners, the plant emits sulfuric acid, hydrochloric acid and other toxic chemicals into the air.

In Chicago's Pilsen neighborhood, Juarez Community Academy High School is a block from the H. Kramer and Co. smelter, the region's largest industrial source of airborne lead.

And in south suburban Riverdale, Patton Elementary is across the street from a Mittal Steel mill that towers over the neighborhood. A few blocks away is Carver Primary School in the Altgeld Gardens public housing complex, where President Barack Obama once worked as a young community organizer.

"It's always a problem here," said Cheryl Johnson, a lifelong Altgeld resident who carries on the environmental activism her mother, Hazel, started in the 1980s. "It can smell bad, but what's even scarier is the stuff you can't smell."

It is difficult to fully assess the dangers that people face from living or going to school near one of these factories. Air pollution is just one factor that

can affect the chances of developing health problems.

However, EPA officials said the results of their new air tests could direct future enforcement actions against polluters. Based on what the agency finds, the number of schools tested might grow, too.

"We realize this is an initial screening effort," said Chet Wayland, director of the EPA's air quality-assessment division. "We're trying to get a good, representative sample from across the country of what children might be exposed to outside schools."

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