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Environmental advocacy group launches independent investigation into Brunswick smell

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Feb 16, 2021

State government agencies aren't the only ones investigating the foul smell in the Brunswick area.

The Glynn Environmental Coalition has worked for months to help citizens organize and make complaints to the state Environmental Protection Division in an attempt to address what may be a serious air quality issue.

Strange smells are not new, Brunswick residents say, but since late 2020 more and more have reported smelling particularly foul odors that in some cases cause physical reactions. The stench catalyzed a marked increase in the number of air quality complaints to the EPD, which catalogues and investigates them as they come in.

"We know that the EPD is also investigating the (industrial) facilities, and that's great, but we're very concerned that at the end of the investigation, it is a possibility that if there's no non-compliance that their conclusion is going to be (that) they don't know where it's coming from," said GEC Executive Director Rachael Thompson.

Citizens deserve an answer, and the GEC hopes to be able to provide one if the EPD can't. To that end, she said the coalition is conducting an investigation "side-by-side and paralleling" the EPD's.

Using information from the EPD and its own investigation, Thompson said the GEC will look into every possible source of the smell and possible solutions.

Citizens have been asked to report location, time, wind direction, wind speed and temperature at the time the odor was noticed and a description of it to EPD Environmental Specialist Brett Berry at brett.berry@dnr.ga.gov or 470-464-4675.

Even those criteria may not be enough to track down a source, Thompson said.

"A new weather factor we're going to be looking at is dew point," Thompson said. "Obviously the goal of a lot of industries with discharge is to emit air discharge a certain number of feet into the air, but if you have a low dew point a lot of that is going to condense and come right to ground, which is what we need to consider."

Taking the EPD's map of the locations of two months of complaints and overlaying it with weather data will hopefully reveal some clues. That tool should be available to the public when it's finished, she said. The format is yet to be determined, as the coalition needs to be careful not to reveal location data from the complaints.

She's fairly confident at least one of the major industries in the area is contributing to the issue.

Spokespeople for Georgia Pacific and Pinova have denied any changes in operations at either plant that would cause an odor.

Neither investigation may turn up anything. Thompson said she was involved in what appeared to be a clear case of water contamination in another community only to turn up little evidence to act on.

It's not likely to be a quick process, either. Thompson said two volunteers, one specializing in GIS mapping and another with good knowledge of local weather and patterns, will speed the project along, but it's not likely to be publicly available until next month.

"That's one of the pitfalls of being a science-based advocacy organization," Thompson said.

Even if some solid evidence of air contamination is uncovered, the EPD may not be able to act on it. A presidential executive order spurred by the need to adjust operations at industrial plants during the COVID-19 pandemic may clear a potential culprit of what would normally be wrongdoing.

“I haven’t really dug into that avenue because we’re trying to respond on a local level first and arm ourselves with information, but as we go down this road that will be the question,” Thompson said. “What kind of enforcement action is necessary to make sure this doesn’t happen again?”

Air quality monitoring is going to be an essential part of the current investigation, and while she wasn’t prepared to reveal all the details, the GEC plans to partner with the group to do spot air testing when someone reports a particularly bad smell.

It’s not an issue that’s going to go away anytime soon.

To help citizens know what to do when they experience poor air quality in the future, the GEC plans to host a series of public education events on various aspects of the state’s environmental laws and regulations, emission permitting and local industries.

“We have this understanding that there are some 30-plus entities (in Glynn County) that have permits, but what does that mean?” Thompson said.

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