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## Brunswick smell irks residents

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Over the last month or so, residents have raised quite a stink over a pungent stench — or cocktail of odors — mostly in the southern half of the county.

Dozens of complaints have been filed with the state Department of Natural Resources' Environmental Protection Division office from Brunswick to Blythe Island to Jekyll Island, most originating in the past two months. since the Thanksgiving holiday.

Fingers have been pointed at the Pinova pine resin plant, the Brunswick-Glynn County Joint Water and Sewer Commission's sewage treatment plant on U.S. 341 and the Georgia Pacific pulp mill. Not all describe an entirely similar scent.

### The Problem

Some who spoke to The News described it as a stronger-than-usual pulp mill odor. Others detected a note of propane. In the Facebook group "Smell Something, Tell Something," in which Brunswick residents share information and compare notes, some have compared it to rotting garbage, rotting cabbage and sulfur.

The reaction folks have to the smell does not vary nearly as much.

"It's pungent and it's acrid and it burns your nose, and my eyes swell up and it clogs my sinuses," said Paula Juneau, a longtime resident of the Golden Isles.

The majority of complaints received by the EPD came from the downtown Brunswick area, but Juneau lives in the Lake View neighborhood off U.S. 17 and says she can smell it just as bad there.

It's not a typical Brunswick odor, she says. Juneau, 73 and retired, was born and raised in Glynn County and worked as an EMT and cardiovascular technician for decades. What she smells now — an odor that's even started to invade her home through the ventilation — is new.

"I don't know what this is and I don't want to blame any one thing," Juneau said. "For us, it seems to be when the winds are blowing westerly. It concerns me because you can't get away from it.

"I know what you smell goes into your lungs and into your bloodstream."

She's not alone. Susan Bates, a downtown Brunswick resident and business owner, is just as mystified and shares her concerns.

"I've lived here a long time, since high school, so I'm not unaccustomed to living around paper mills and what that means, but the past few weeks this just feels different and smells different," Bates said.

She thought it was an isolated incident the first time. But then it became more predictable, and she was able to narrow it down to occurring on late nights and weekends.

At first she dismissed it but then started to see a pattern herself and hear from others.

"What I would like to find out is the source," Bates said. "We don't want to unfairly point a finger at someone if it's not them at all, you know."

Rather than complain, Bates and other residents collaborated on the "Smell Something, Tell Something" Facebook group, on which residents share their experiences and are instructed to submit the time, date, location and the wind direction at the point they notice the smell to the EPD.

"It feels more like a problem-solving situation now than 'We're going to blame a corporation for this,'" Bates said. "We're just trying to improve our air quality."

Something needs to be done soon, and organizing is the fastest way to get it done, said Lance Sabbee, who also lives and owns a business in Brunswick. If the odor remains, it might start to affect the city economically by driving away potential residents or businesses.

"There's two objectives from my perspective," Sabbee said. "One is the EPD needs more information so they can do inspections and that kind of thing, and the other is to get our elected officials to put some pressure on these companies to get them to clean up."

## The Chase

At the Environmental Protection Division, public-officials-turned sleuths are trying to help. But their investigation is at a very early stage.

“I think it’s going to be a while before we figure this one out,” said Beth Stevenson, program manager for the EPD.

Several members of the team are taking data sent from residents and cataloging it, using the time, date, location and wind speed of each instance to narrow down the potential sources.

Brett Berry, EPD environmental compliance specialist, said the data suggests whatever is causing the odor is likely within a five-mile radius of the Brunswick peninsula. Within that radius are 32 facilities with permits to emit various chemicals deemed non-harmful.

Most of those don’t actually emit anything, he said, but the permit is required on the off-chance they do.

“The air permit is based on a potential to emit, and the classifications are based on what they’re going to emit or the volume they could emit,” Berry said. “They’re probably not emitting anything at all right now.”

Each will be inspected for compliance while the EPD team in the Southeast Georgia region and officials from the Air Quality Branch in Atlanta try to make sense of reports from citizens.

The issue is elusive enough and troublesome enough to attract the attention of the Air Quality Branch, which handles the Title V permits required for major industries like Georgia Pacific and

Pinova to operate.

“The folks in Brunswick have by far been doing the heavy lifting, but I’ve been aware and working on this since early to mid-December,” said Steve Allison, chemicals and minerals unit manager with the Air Quality Branch.

He’ll be in the area this week doing some inspections of his own, especially of the larger facilities. The requirements of their operating permit include that they keep records demonstrating compliance.

“I know just sending complaints to us may not seem satisfying, but it is helping,” Allison said.

“Unfortunately the answers don’t always come quickly. I can say the folks in our office, they have looked under every rock.”

## The Suspects

Stevenson and her team are far from ready to point the finger at anyone. At first blush, the four odor and its effects seem to be unique to Brunswick, at least in their jurisdiction.

Two other paper mills, Rayonier Paper Company in Jesup and the Interstate Paper plant in Riceboro, do generate some odor complaints, but nowhere near what the EPD has heard from Brunswick, she said.

Local government agencies and those at which the finger is often pointed say they don’t know the cause but are looking into it.

“Looking at all of our operational data — and we have a lot of it, we keep record 24/7 — we don’t see anything in our operational data that shows an irregularity with the consistency that would correlate with these complaints,” said Randal Morris with Georgia Pacific’s public affairs arm.

Staff at the plant are doing a deep dive into the data, he said, but nothing has changed at the plant to trigger the kinds of complaints the EPD has received of late.

“I’m not putting it off on anybody, but we don’t see anything at this time,” Morris said. “Our goal is not to meet those (air quality) requirements but to fall well within those requirements and not even come close to the boundary.

“We’ll work with the community to identify the source, and if it’s us we’ll apologize and remedy the situation. We value our relationship with our community and our neighbors, and it’s as big a concern for us.”

Similarly, Pinova Vice President of Operations Molly Matthews said the pine resin plant is operating normally and has no reason to believe the plant is creating any unusual odors.

A third organization on which blame has been placed, the Brunswick-Glynn County Joint Water and Sewer Commission, doesn’t think it could be the culprit either, said JWSC Executive Director Andrew Burroughs.

The Academy Creek Wastewater Treatment Plant on U.S. 341 generates a localized sewage smell, a far cry from recent reports.

“We occasionally do have odors from our wastewater treatment plant on 341, but those have not gotten worse and are not the cause of the widespread odors we’re smelling in Glynn County right now,” Burroughs said.

By next year, even that problem should be dealt with after major upgrades are finished at Academy Creek, he said.

### Searching for Answers

The issue remains unsolved for the time being, and likely won’t be addressed in the near future, according to EPD officials. Even if they do find the source, being offensive to the olfactory senses is not inherently illegal.

“We don’t regulate odor,” Berry said. “The process we have is to look at compliance-related issues.”

That may not be a satisfying answer, but some are already looking beyond the DNR for a solution. Enter the Glynn Environmental Coalition, which has a history of fighting for clean air.

“We’ve been following air quality for years, going back to the late 1990s, early 2000s,” said GEC Executive Director Rachael Thompson. “Our organization filed a lawsuit because the facilities in Brunswick did not have air permits even though the Clean Air Act required them.”

A long period of quiet followed. When Thompson took over at the GEC in 2018, she’d get periodic calls about strange odors.

“Starting around Thanksgiving, the calls have been persistent,” Thompson said.

She always recommends filing a complaint with the EPD, but that agency is laser-focused on compliance of each individual permit holder on the ground to the point that it’s blind to how different emissions may mix, and the collective discharge of different plants may create the odors Brunswick residents smell.

“How do we get the EPD to look at the cumulative effect and modify the permits so the residents don’t have to deal with this nuisance air experience?” Thompson said.

Her solution is a fairly simple one: go to their bosses.

She sees two possible explanations for the unusual odor, and neither of them could be addressed by the EPD. One is an executive order issued by outgoing President Donald Trump during the COVID-19 outbreak, essentially loosening air permit compliance requirements in light of the outbreak.

Another is funding. The EPD has seen a reduction in funding over the years, she said, and has had to shut down air quality monitors in Brunswick to save money.

“There are options outside mandating the state to do it, and there is lobbying that can be done at the state level,” Thompson said. “There’s lots of options other than us doing it personally.”

The GEC begins organizing volunteers to hold town halls for the public to speak about their experiences, contacting elected officials at the local, state and federal levels, and collecting data to support its case that air quality in Brunswick is a problem. Email [gec@glynnenvironmental.org](mailto:gec@glynnenvironmental.org) for more information on how to get involved.

“It’s going to be a two-phased approach, but essentially we’re having a volunteer meeting on (Thursday) for volunteers to plan the town hall, and then we’re going to have a town hall where anyone can show up,” Thompson said.

City officials have already expressed support for the effort, she said, and the Golden Isles Chamber of Commerce is aware of the matter.

“We haven’t made any firm determinations at this point,” said City Manager Regina McDuffie. “We’ll contact EPD and see if they have any insight, but my thoughts are that we would definitely like to improve the air quality on a permanent basis. We want to make sure, if there are improvements that need to be made in the operations causing it, that we encourage them to make those.”

For the time being, residents are advised to set up an air purifier, air freshener, scented candle or incense.

Anyone who smells a bad odor they can’t explain should file an air quality complaint with the EPD. Email Berry at [brett.berry@dnr.ga.gov](mailto:brett.berry@dnr.ga.gov) or call 404-464-4675 with the location, time, wind direction, wind speed and temperature at the time the odor was noticed and a description of it.

