



Group seeks crackdown on pollution

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DURHAM -- A city activist group is pushing state and local officials to crack down on pollution in a stream near the McDougald Terrace public housing complex.

Members of Durham Congregations, Associations & Neighborhoods -- Durham CAN, for short -- believe the contamination in Third Fork Creek is coming from a chemical-distribution center on East Pettigrew Street operated by Brenntag Southeast Inc.

During a forum on Wednesday they questioned regulators from the N.C. Department of Environment and Natural Resources about the problem. State Rep. Paul Luebke, D-Durham, was also on hand and urged the regulators to work with the activists.

"What needs to happen here is that representatives of the community need to be part of the conversation with this company," Luebke told the DENR officials present, adding that they should also keep him posted about their dealings with the company.

Forum moderator Gerald Taylor said Brenntag representatives had been invited to Wednesday's meeting, but elected not to attend.

He said they have offered to meet with activists in the near future to discuss the situation, and have asked that city officials orchestrate the meeting.

Complaints voiced Wednesday date to the 1980s, when a chemical fire at what was then called the Southchem facility at 2000 E. Pettigrew St. injured 18 people and forced the evacuation of about 1,000.

More recently, odor has been the main problem. Residents said strong, acidic smells emerge occasionally and are often so severe that they disrupt classes at Burton Elementary School.

Burton is on Mathison Street about a third of a mile from Brenntag's facility. McDougald Terrace is about half mile away off Lawson Street.

The problem has existed for about 11 years and sometimes forces the parents of asthmatic children to keep them indoors, CAN activist Wisdom Pharaoh said.

"The smell that emanates from it is horrendous and is the smell of death," she said, adding, "It is our birthright to breathe the same fresh air as those who live in well-to-do

neighborhoods."

DENR Division of Water Quality Regional Supervisor Danny Smith told the activists that his office received a complaint about the Brenntag plant this spring and conducted an inspection in May.

Inspectors gathered water samples and sent them to a lab for analysis. The results came back last month and are still under review, he said.

Durham CAN members aren't relying entirely on the state. They're also working with researchers from Duke University's Children's Environmental Health Initiative and the Nicholas School of the Environment and Earth Sciences.

Jeff Davis, outreach coordinator for the Children's Environmental Health Initiative, said chemists from the Nicholas School walked the creek Wednesday morning.

"We were able to get a commitment from a faculty member to run some sediment and perhaps ambient-air samples on days when the odor is noticeable to residents," Davis said.

State regulators have labeled Third Fork Creek an "impaired" stream, meaning enough pollution is in it to inhibit some forms of aquatic life and some human uses.

The Division of Water Quality's 2005 plan for the Cape Fear River basin said the Brenntag facility failed a "whole effluent toxicity" test five times in the early years of this decade.

Analysts conduct the whole-effluent test by exposing a variety of aquatic plants and animals to water samples and seeing what happens, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Despite the tests, the "in-stream impacts of these failures could not be assessed," state regulators said in the 2005 Cape Fear plan. But "chemical leaching at Brenntag may be a potential source of toxicity."

Brenntag, a German firm, doesn't manufacture chemicals at the Pettigrew Street plant. Rather, it receives shipments of them by rail and then loads them into trucks or tanks for distribution to customers.

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