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News Release – March 2, 2016

Change of Leadership at DEQ Was Needed

Statement on the Resignation of Dick Pedersen, DEQ Director

EUGENE, OR – The resignation of Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) Director Dick Pedersen signals the enormity of the failure of DEQ to meet its responsibility to protect the public from air toxics. Under Division 26, DEQ has had authority to properly regulate toxic air emissions, but chose not to use this authority. However, due to DEQ's antiquated air permitting system, toxic emitters are polluting the air with very little regulatory oversight, with possible acute and life-long health consequences for Oregon residents.

DEQ betrayed the public by failing to use its authority to protect people living near industrial areas, predominately working class and low income communities. These are the communities that bear the brunt of air toxics and the inevitable health consequences. As a result, hundreds of thousands of nearby residents exposed to dangerous levels of arsenic, chromium and cadmium may find themselves at increased risk for cancer, endocrine disruption and respiratory ailments.

There are air toxics hot spots in northeast Portland whose source the regulatory agency cannot identify. With public outrage mostly focused on southeast Portland, air pollution problems in other neighborhoods comprised of working class and culturally diverse residents are more likely to be ignored.

"This leadership change is an opportunity for DEQ to renew its course and do the job it is mandated to do: protect people and the environment," says Lisa Arkin, Executive Director of the statewide environmental justice organization, Beyond Toxics. "The agency needs to overhaul its entire approach to protecting the environment. We are cautiously optimistic the new leadership will stand up to industry and perform the job Oregonians pay him or her to do." Beyond Toxics has participated in numerous air quality work groups convened by the DEQ, including the Portland Air Toxics Solutions Advisory Committee.

Pederson's apparent lack of leadership and oversight of the air toxics program allowed the agency to become secretive. The DEQ has not posted air pollution permits on their website. There is already precedent – in Lane County, the air pollution agency posts all air permits and review reports on their website in order to be accountable to their constituents.

DEQ has lost the trust of the public. In the eyes of public health organizations who have steadfastly attempted to work with the DEQ, the agency has proven itself a weak and unwilling partner. The time for DEQ to begin rebuilding the public's trust is now. Beyond Toxics expects the new DEQ director to make the agency accountable and emboldened to protect our air, water, land and the public's health.

Beyond Toxics works to guarantee environmental protections and health for all communities and residents. We expose root causes of toxic pollution and help communities find effective, lasting solutions.

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