

Wood products workers voice concerns about state's Cleaner Air Oregon plan

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What started with the surprising discovery in Portland of previously undetected toxic chemicals in the air, released by art glassmakers, likely will lead to more stringent air pollution rules and testing statewide.

And manufacturing business owners and workers around Lane County now are worrying about the effects of the more stringent air pollution regulations proposed by the state in the Cleaner Air Oregon program.

In Lane County, air quality is regulated by the Lane Regional Air Protection Agency. It likely would follow any new standards set by the state.

Eugene-based Seneca Sawmill Co. has spent more than \$100 million in upgrades during the past seven years at its lumber mill and wood-burning power plant along Highway 99, Seneca Chief Executive Officer Todd Payne said.

"A portion of this investment was dedicated to air emission control equipment and technology," Payne told local and state air regulators at a public hearing earlier this month in Eugene on the new clean air proposal. "Now, the real question facing us: Will these recent investments be good enough to meet the proposed, unrealistic standards contained in the draft rules?"

The state Department of Environmental Quality and LRAPA already have a raft of air pollution rules for businesses, mainly based on federal regulations. But the rules have gaps, allowing companies to meet requirements while at the same time releasing chemicals that pose health risks for their neighbors, air regulators say.

The proposed Cleaner Air Oregon rules would close the gaps and provide a better understanding of how companies might be hurting the health of their neighbors, said Keith Johnson, a DEQ program manager. "In some cases, DEQ doesn't know what is being emitted" by a manufacturer, he said.

Under the proposed program, businesses might be required to reduce certain toxic emissions, if monitoring showed the companies were exceeding what DEQ considers health safety limits.

The DEQ and LRAPA would charge companies covered by the new programs a fee, in part to cover the cost of additional workers at the government agencies. The draft rules show annual fees ranging from just more than \$100 to thousands of dollars, depending on the class of permit.

The state's program would start by focusing on 80 out of about 2,500 Oregon businesses with existing air pollution permits, according to the DEQ. Air regulators would select the first 80 companies by how close they are to large residential populations, and what percentage of people living nearby are children or minorities.

Current rules don't require companies to report some types of toxic emissions to regulators or allow agencies to weigh health risks to neighbors when evaluating a permit, according to the DEQ.

None of the 80 businesses would be in Lane County because the DEQ does not enforce air quality in the county.

Five to 10 Lane County businesses might be the first to be subject to the more stringent air pollution rules if the state adopts the new clean air program and LRAPA follows suit, said Max Hueftle, an LRAPA environmental engineer. The air pollution agency would select the group from a pool of about 200 businesses that hold LRAPA air pollution permits.

"It's not set in stone, and we're still figuring out how we're going to implement these rules," he said.

It remains unclear which businesses would be affected, statewide or in Lane County, with the rules not yet finalized.

The 200 companies with air pollution permits in the county range from commercial bakeries and industrial rock crushers to paint manufacturers and Seneca's wood-burning power plant and lumber mill.

The Oregon DEQ and the Oregon Health Authority drafted the Cleaner Air Oregon rules and are taking public comment until Friday, and the program is expected to begin in the middle of 2018.

Under the draft rules, the selected companies would have to track any release of more 600 chemicals — 260 of which are known air toxics — and file reports with air regulators. The chemicals range from aniline to zinc oxide.

The push for stricter air pollution rules dates to the discovery of toxic emissions from some Portland glassmakers.

A U.S. Forest Service urban moss study found high levels of the heavy metals arsenic and cadmium around Bullseye Glass in southeast Portland. Exposure to the heavy metals can cause cancer. The company temporarily was shut down as a result of the discovery, which became public in early 2016. Bullseye this month sued Gov. Kate Brown and other top Oregon officials for \$30 million, arguing that the state unfairly targeted the company.

But state officials say the heavy metals discovery underscores the problem of businesses complying with existing Oregon air pollution rules while at the same time releasing high levels of unregulated toxics.

Brown launched Cleaner Air Oregon in April 2016.

DEQ and OHA officials have been traveling around the state to hear from the public about the proposal. The clean-air road show stopped in Eugene on Dec. 7, and more than 150 people squeezed into a basement meeting room at the DEQ's downtown office.

Payne, the top executive at Seneca, was among the critics of the plan. Most of the other commenters also work in the wood products industry, at mills in Lane and Douglas counties, and joined him in criticizing the plan or warning that it could harm businesses.

About 10 workers with forest products company Roseburg also gave comment. The Springfield-based business has more than 3,000 employees, working in plants in Oregon, California, Montana, Louisiana and Mississippi.

The one person at the meeting who spoke in favor of the Cleaner Air Oregon program was with Beyond Toxics, a Eugene nonprofit organization that advocates against the use of toxic chemicals.

"We are thankful to the continued emphasis on environmental justice and community health protection in the Cleaner Air Oregon rules, and would like to see the DEQ continue to focus on reducing the impacts of toxic air on human health," said Mysti Frost, an organizer for Beyond Toxics.

The fees and the costs of testing required under the proposed Cleaner Air Oregon program would be an "undue hardship" for businesses, said Springfield Area Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Vonnie Mikkelsen. The chamber has more than 750 Lane County companies as members, primarily companies in Springfield and Eugene. She said she has heard concerns from companies in many business sectors.

"It will at best curtail current operations and at worst push employers of all sizes to look elsewhere to operate or shut down altogether," Mikkelsen said.

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The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality and the Oregon Health Authority are taking comments on the proposed Cleaner Air Oregon Program, would change rules regarding air toxics released by industrial and commercial businesses.

Deadline: Dec. 22

"Will these recent investments be good enough to meet the ... draft rules?"

— Todd Payne, Chief Executive Officer of Seneca Sawmill Co.