

EPA must see big picture of pollution, panel hears
N.O. meeting looks at troubled La. town

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Black dust from nearby carbon black manufacturers, airborne toxic benzene from a Strategic Petroleum Reserve storage salt dome, contamination of a public drinking water supply with heavy metals and bacteria, and the spraying of insecticides, herbicides and fertilizers near many homes are just some of the problems residents in Four Corners in rural St. Mary Parish have faced in recent years.

Many residents of the impoverished, 600-member community have health problems, including lupus, cancer, hypertension and diabetes, and an unusual number of children there have been diagnosed with attention deficit disorder and with genetic defects, resident Clemantine Matthews told members of an Environmental Justice Advisory Council meeting in New Orleans on Tuesday.

The community is an example of why the Environmental Protection Agency shouldn't look at problems chemical by chemical, but rather at pollution in context with larger community issues, according to a report aimed at advising the EPA on how the agency can better address environmental justice issues stemming from multiple environmental threats.

On Tuesday, the council heard from Four Corners and similar communities in Texas and Oklahoma during the first of four days of hearings on the report.

A draft of the report being reviewed by the advisory council recommends that the EPA change its outlook from being an agency that reacts to individual environmental problems to one that has a "bias for action" in dealing with communities with multiple problems. The agency should also respond immediately to a community's concerns, before scientific studies that could take years to complete can suggest a course of action, the draft said.

Underlying the report's conclusions is an expanding number of scientific studies that have found exposure to multiple chemicals from different sources can cause unexpected and often increased health effects. And those effects can be exacerbated by social and economic factors, which the

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report calls "multiple stressors," including a population already in poor health because of malnutrition, lack of adequate health care or health insurance, or community members whose culture doesn't allow them to admit health problems, the report said. Each new layer of stress can make individuals more susceptible to the effects of chemical exposures, the report said.

To help the EPA change its approach to such at-risk communities, the report recommends the agency establish at least one pilot project aimed at reducing the risk from multiple environmental hazards in each of its 10 regions.

Each regional office also should target five environmentally overburdened, disadvantaged communities -- including American Indian communities -- during day-to-day activities, such as inspections and permit-writing, the draft said.

It also said the agency should develop a "tool kit" of proven risk reduction actions and create programs that provide incentives for industries and communities to go beyond federal requirements in reducing risk from environmental threats.

And in determining a community's risk from pollution, the EPA should also make sure it's looking at the social effects of pollution, which might be just as disruptive as the health effects caused by chemicals, the report said.

In Four Corners, residents formed a community group a few years ago to address their problems. Most residents lived in substandard homes with leaking plumbing, poorly functioning septic tanks and leaking roofs resulting from hurricane damage.

Today, they've brought 250 homes up to modern standards, thanks to \$10 million in guaranteed loans, and put on their own health fairs and environmental workshops to address other problems. They've even reached an understanding with nearby sugar cane growers that has reduced spraying in the area, Matthews said.

The council continues its meeting today at 9 a.m. and continues through Friday at the Sheraton New Orleans Hotel, 500 Canal St. Public comments on environmental justice issues will be accepted today during a 7 p.m. session.

For more information, visit the council's Web site at www.epa.gov/compliance/environmentaljustice/nejac/next_meeting.html.

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