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Plaquemines air testing finds potential health concerns near coal terminals

IMT coal.jpg

A 2012 photo of the International Marine Terminals coal facility, which sits south of the community of Ironton on the west bank of Plaquemines Parish. The proposed RAM Terminal would be north of Ironton. Another coal facility, United Bulk Terminal, sits on the other side of the Mississippi River and is the largest dry bulk export terminal on the Gulf Coast. The Sept. 5, 2012, photo shows coal flowing through a breach in a containment dike around a storage pile at the IMT facility following Hurricane Isaac. (*Gulf Restoration Network*)

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After three months of air monitoring near a **Plaquemines Parish** coal export terminal, some Plaquemines residents concerned about respiratory illnesses have found potentially unhealthy levels of pollution, according to a coalition of local and national environmental groups.

Testing results show that air near the **International Marine Terminal** in Port Sulphur showed signs of elevated fine particulate matter, known as PM-10, that could potentially cause health concerns to sensitive people if there was long-term exposure.

During one 24-hour period in September, PM-10 levels of 30.1 micrograms per cubic meter of air (ug/m³) were monitored.

The World Health Organization states that PM-10 levels of more than 20 ug/m³ are unhealthy, with **one World Health Organization study in 2006** stating that 13 Italian cities averaged 8,220 deaths a year because of average PM-10 concentrations above 20 ug/m³.

Still, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency sets **the national annual air quality standard for PM-10** at 50 ug/m³ and the daily concentration at 150 ug/m³, so the peaks in Plaquemines' air quality measured in the fall of 2013 did not rise above national standards.

But various environmental group workers said the results show that additional coal terminals in the community should not be considered.

The **Clean Gulf Commerce Coalition** on Thursday released a statement about the elevated levels. That

coalition collaborates with the Christian Ministers Missionary Baptist Association of Plaquemines, Gulf Restoration Network, Louisiana Environmental Action Network, Louisiana Bucket Brigade, Sierra Club, Public Citizen, Air Alliance Houston and other community and environmental organizations.

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The proposed RAM Terminals LLC coal and petroleum coke facility would be on the property marked in blue.

Providence Engineering &
Environmental Group, Louisiana
Department of Environmental Quality

That coalition, along with local residents, **recently has been fighting a proposed new coal and petroleum coke terminal in Myrtle Grove – the RAM Terminals LLC facility** – saying that it poses a health threat to

nearby residents, would contribute to greenhouse gas emissions that result in climate change, and threatens the construction of a **federal-state freshwater diversion project** that had been planned to run through the site.

The EPA states that exposure to PM-10 can cause breathing and respiratory problems, damage to lung tissue, cancer or even death.

“The elderly, children, and people with chronic lung disease, influenza or asthma, are especially sensitive to the effects of particulate matter,” according to the EPA.

“What’s particular worrisome is that high levels of PM-10 are usually found in urban areas with a lot of freeways,” said Denny Larson, executive director of **Global Community Monitor**, which worked with members of the Plaquemines community to monitor the local air quality. “So our results, since they came from a relatively rural area, raise a red flag. And they point a finger at the coal facilities, with their large piles of uncovered and uncontrolled coal.”

The environmental groups say that the dust is coming mainly from the International Marine Terminal in Port Sulphur on the west side of the **Mississippi River**, and from the **United Bulk Terminal** in Davant on the river’s east side.

“Around here, asthma and other respiratory problems are so common, especially among children and the elderly, that we thought coal dust must be the culprit,” said Cornell Battle, an Ironton resident who took part in the testing. “These results give us evidence for what we already suspected. If our air is already bad, we certainly don’t need more coal terminals moving in here.”

Some of Plaquemines air-dust monitoring raw data

Warren Lawrence of Myrtle Grove, who

lives near IMT, said “the coal dust is horrific.” He said, “When my grandkids come in from playing outside, I have to wash them off with a hose.

“That’s why I took part in this testing,” Lawrence said. “I wanted to be able to show that we have a serious problem with pollution here.”

In 2008, residents from Myrtle Grove and Woodpark won a class-action suit against the International Marine Terminal, filed because of coal dust generated by the terminal. Mitigation efforts finally began moving forward in December and the community monitoring, scheduled to test the air for entire year, is expected to see how those efforts affect PM-10 levels.

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On Wednesday (Jan. 22) at 6:30 p.m., Plaquemines residents will meet in the Belle Chasse Auditorium, **8398 Louisiana 23**, to discuss the proposed RAM terminal, as well as proposals to bring in coal trains that would serve the RAM and International Marine Terminals.

Louisiana accounts for about 20 percent of U.S. coal exports, mostly because of its location at the intersection of Mississippi River barge routes serving Midwestern states with large coal deposits and Gulf shipping routes serving Europe and Latin America, according to **a May report** from the National Mining Association.

The New Orleans customs district, which includes Plaquemines, was second in the United States in terms of coal exports, according to **a quarterly report** by the U.S. Energy Information Administration.

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