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High levels of sulfur dioxide continue to plague Muscatine residents

Muscatine residents must welcome assurances by Grain Processing Corporation (GPC) of Muscatine that it plans to invest \$100 million in air pollution control projects. But the estimated four years it will take to complete the projects mean residents will, in the interim, continue to be plagued by poor air quality days, according to a recent report by the Air Quality Bureau of the Iowa Department of Natural Resources and data obtained online since the release of the report.

According to the report entitled, "Iowa Exceedances of the National Ambient Air Quality standards, 2011," which covers the period from January 1 to May 12, 2011, airborne sulfur dioxide exceeded safe levels during eight days in Muscatine. And according to the State Hygienic Lab's website, exceedances occurred after their report as well, on May 21, May 22, May 30, and May 31, for a total time of more than twenty-five hours during those days.

"One hour of high sulfur dioxide levels is enough to cause breathing difficulties and maybe even a trip to a medical clinic or hospital for some residents of Muscatine," said Leland Searles, air quality program director for the Iowa Environmental Council.

In addition, Searles noted that levels have gone above the "Unhealthy for Sensitive Groups" category to the "Unhealthy" category on three days in May. The EPA's standards say that this means that healthy adults and children may experience problems on those days and during those peak episodes.

Sulfur dioxide (SO₂) is known to trigger severe asthmatic symptoms and reduced lung capacity for adults and children suffering from asthma. This can happen over a short period of 5 to 10 minutes with only light exercise. For children without asthma, there is evidence that high SO₂ levels may produce mild to moderate coughing and other symptoms, especially if another respiratory illness is present.

The Council has received inquiries from concerned citizens who wonder if the DNR should do more to predict these poor air quality episodes and provide community notice. Calls to the Air Quality Bureau have met with the response that the staff does not have the time or resources, given DNR budget cuts over the last several years, for this kind of community notification. It appears that there is no means by which a community such as Muscatine can obtain alerts. Instead, residents will have to rely on their own noses, throats, and lungs as indicators that there is an air quality problem.

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