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Concerns Raised About Gerdau Ameristeel's Toxic Emissions

Alcoa, Tenn. – An initial inquiry into an air pollution permit renewal at the Gerdau Ameristeel plant on 1919 Tennessee Ave., in Knoxville, shows that it may have technical problems and would allow significant levels of toxic chemicals to be released to the community's air, possibly in violation of federal air quality standards.

“Based on the company's Toxic Release Inventory submitted to the Environmental Protection Agency” said Diane Heminway, United Steelworkers (USW) Environmental Projects Coordinator, “that plant released over 20 tons of toxic chemicals into the air in 2003, including nearly two tons of lead. However, according to the company's own emission reports, they emitted an estimated 4.67 tons of lead in 2003. So which amount is accurate?”

Exposure to lead is known to cause serious health damage, particularly to young children and the unborn.

“Why is a company located in the middle of a community being permitted to emit huge quantities of lead?” questioned USW Sub-District Director John Herron. We think that the community deserves factual answers.

“More than 70,000 people live within three miles of this plant,” Herron said. “Most of them are considered low-income families but they have a right to clean air and not be subject to the potentially devastating health problems that toxins like lead can create.”

In 2005, Gerdau Ameristeel received approval to greatly increase production, but there is no record of the company adding the pollution controls essential for protecting the public's health, according to Heminway.

“Logic indicates that an increase in production would result in an increase in pollution but the draft permit was issued without the results of stack tests that measure the actual emissions.” noted Heminway. “Nobody knows with certainty how much pollution is coming out of those smokestacks every day, so how can the public comment on the permit without this vital data?”

Air quality in Knoxville is of special concern since Knox County already exceeds the allowable concentration standards for a number of pollutants regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

A public hearing to discuss the permit renewal is scheduled for March 3, at 10 a.m., in the Auditorium, Knox County Health Department, 140 Dameron Avenue, in Knoxville. However,

requests have been made to reschedule the meeting to March 7, at 7 p.m., so that more people who live and work in the area can attend.

The deadline for written comments is set to end on March 1. Authorities have indicated that oral comments will also be accepted in consideration for the permit renewal.

“We want to be certain that any permit renewal will require that the public health be protected,” Herron concluded.

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