

Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League

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**For immediate release
October 8, 2015**

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Group Charges The State For Issuing An Environmentally Unjust Permit To Duke Energy and EPA Failing To Regulate and Enforce in Latest Lawsuit

Today at a press conference in Raleigh, Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League and Concern Citizens of Richmond County renewed their citizen's lawsuit against the US Environmental Protection Agency for failure to comply with the Clean Air Act. One year ago the group filed its initial legal challenge to EPA Region 4 in Atlanta charging that North Carolina granted a permit to Duke Energy's combustion turbine expansion project in Hamlet, NC that was in violation of the federal Clean Air Act and Environmental Justice laws. The petition states, "In sum, the Permit allows excessive emissions of air pollutants which are having a negative impact on public health and allows an ongoing environmental injustice. We call upon the EPA to object to this permit."

According to the Clean Air Act, the EPA was required to respond to the League's legal petition within sixty days. Cary Rodgers, the League's Community Organizer said, "September 17 was the one year anniversary of filing our first legal challenge to the EPA. They're over 300 days late and still no action." He continues, "Who is going to hold Duke accountable? It is obvious that the state doesn't and that the EPA is too slow to react?"

Lou Zeller, the League's Executive Director, said "EPA must be held accountable for its failure to thoroughly investigate the state's unjust and illegal permit that was issued to Duke Energy." Zeller said that this is an example of how the use of natural gas to generate electricity is a bad alternative to other fossil fuels. He continued, "The health of the citizen's is put at high risk because the permit allowed Duke Energy to increase its pollution by 36%."

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The group contends that Duke Energy's shift to natural gas in Hamlet has already nearly tripled its overall level of pollution in the last seven years in a community that is already vulnerable to respiratory illnesses. From 2008 to 2012, actual emissions of pollutants increased by 115% for nitrogen oxides, 145% for sulfur dioxide, and 146% for formaldehyde. In fact according to the Richmond County Health Department 2014 Report, it states that "Richmond County ranked significantly higher than its peer counties for the five year span 2007-2011 for Emergency Department visits and hospital inpatient stays related to a primary diagnosis of asthma."

Hamlet resident and CCRC secretary, Kim McCall, who lives less than a mile from Duke Energy's turbines believes her current health and new respiratory challenges are due to Duke's increased pollution. "EPA along with the state has done nothing to investigate the permit Duke was given to increase more pollution on top of air that is already heavily polluted" said CCRC Treasurer, Debra David. "Our group has tried for over a year make sure Duke and the state is held accountable, but it is shameful that the EPA Region 4 has also dropped the ball."

A couple of weeks ago the group has a confirmation email from the EPA stating that they received the September 17, 2015 legal challenge and the that "the petition currently remains in EPA's queue for a response from the Administrator due to agency workload." Rodgers, added "How many legal challenges will it take for EPA to act?" The groups plan further action.

The Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League is a thirty year old statewide organization with chapters across the state. The Concerned Citizens of Richmond County is a League chapter organized in 2014 by residents of Hamlet.