

Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League

Immediate Release: August 3, 2022

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PRESS RELEASE

Winston-Salem Weaver fire air quality worse than reported by agencies

August 3, 2022: Today the Blue Ridge Environmental Defense League released a report which shows that hazardous air quality during the Weaver Fertilizer Plant fire was downplayed.

The report *Winston-Salem Weaver Fertilizer Plant Fire - Analysis of Publicly Disseminated Air Quality Information During Facility Fire Incident* highlights instances when local officials told the public that the air quality was okay and pollutants were just “irritants” when, in fact, levels of Particulate Matter 2.5 were in the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s hazardous and very unhealthy categories.

It has been six months since the Weaver fertilizer plant fire which began on the evening of January 31. BREDL has recently received EPA air quality data through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) which show that hazardous air quality conditions were downplayed during this industrial incident. We are still waiting for information from a March 22, 2022 open records request with the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality.

The report compares official statements to the then current air quality data, specifically PM 2.5. This air quality data was available to the fire command center in real time but was not available to the general public.

Once EPA set up temporary air monitors around the perimeter of the fire, 29 hours into the incident, the PM 2.5 readings were well into the hazardous category. These air monitors became operational around midnight on Wednesday, February 2.

Five hours later during a press conference officials stated that “all levels have been in the acceptable range”. While, in fact, PM 2.5 concentrations were as high as 9200 micrograms per cubic meter (ug/m3) at the temporary air monitor located at the Wake Forest University police station. EPA community action hazardous conditions start at a concentration of 500 ug/m3.

Mark Barker, author of the BREDL Report, said, “On the afternoon of February 2 a Wake Forest University alert stated that the EPA indicated air quality readings on and near campus posed no threat to individual health and was safe to breathe. However, the on campus EPA air quality data indicated hazardous and very unhealthy PM 2.5 levels.”

PM 2.5 has long been associated with significant health effects especially impacting respiratory and heart conditions.

The community within a one-mile radius of the Weaver facility has a high prevalence of asthma and heart disease according to EPA’s EJScreen tool.

Barker said, “Our analysis leads us to make several recommendations for local, state and federal officials during industrial incidents: be transparent in reporting air quality and associated health impacts, make air quality data available to the public, include an air quality expert in incident press briefings and statements, utilize EJScreen to identify vulnerable communities, and incorporate temporary air monitors into existing EPA current air quality maps.”

The BREDL report is available online at www.bredl.org/reports.htm.

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