

# DEQ dropped the ball. Now what?

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**N**ews that two local glass manufacturers spewed toxic pollution into the air while Oregon Department of Environmental Quality did nothing elicited shock and outrage among unsuspecting Portlanders.

It led city, Multnomah County and state politicians and community groups to demand regional air pollution be reined in.

But area activists have long known Portland's air is a health hazard – in large part due to diesel exhaust.

Whether additional testing around the glass manufacturers shows they pose an increased cancer risk to residents or not, aggregate area pollution from other sources is, and activists don't want this opportunity for meaningful improvements to air pollution regulation to go up in smoke.

This was the topic of a meeting in Old Town on March 3. Statewide environmental justice groups Beyond Toxics and Oregon Environmental Council met with OPAL, Coalition of Communities of Color, and Portland's Neighbors for Clean Air to discuss uniting in an effort to push for policies that will put a cap on pollution while the political climate is ripe.

Meeting attendees said they want to avoid spot fixes aimed at quelling the frenzy but that do little to improve the overall quality of air.

While Oregon waits to see if the \$2.5 million in additional funding for air testing cleared by Gov. Kate Brown, as well as a new DEQ director, can help the agency do its job effectively, environmental groups are also promoting strategies for tackling Portland's toxic air.

*Activists want to harness heightened interest in pollution to bring reform to air quality regulations*

## Right to know

In Eugene, residents believe they have the right to know if they're being exposed to toxic chemicals that can make them sick. In 1996, they voted to implement Eugene's Toxics Right-to-Know program. In doing so, they amended the city charter to require that certain industrially classified facilities bringing in 2,640 pounds or more of a hazardous substance each year must account for exactly where every pound went – whether into the air, water, waste or product – and then report that information to the fire marshal.

Eugene residents can go to the program's website, select their ZIP code, and peruse different output categories – one is “emitted to air” – to see what company is spewing how much of what and where within Eugene's city limits.

If Portland had a similar program, community members and environmental regulators would have had the ability to find out what chemicals Bullseye Glass and Uroboros Glass were releasing into the air, and the amounts, Beyond Toxics Director Lisa Arkin told Street Roots. Arkin sits on the right-to-know program's board.

“It's working very smoothly,” Arkin said. “You can look up any industry and you can see, down to the pound, how much lead they're putting out, how much chromium they're putting out, how much cadmium, how much formaldehyde.”

She said this makes it easy for health and environmental officials

to pinpoint hotspots that may need additional monitoring.

Eugene Fire Marshal's Office employee Joann Eppli has been running Eugene's right-to-know program for the past five years. She is the only employee of the program, which has an annual budget of \$119,000.

She said residents have used the city's right-to-know web page to identify causes for concern. In the past, they have notified Lane County's local air quality authority, which then worked with the businesses to correct their emitting behavior.

Lane County has the only regional air quality authority in the state – a holdover from before DEQ absorbed other regional agencies across Oregon.

While a right-to-know program could be beneficial to Portlanders, said Mary Peveto at Neighbors for Clean Air, without an air quality regulator willing to act on its authority, the program wouldn't do much to fix the current situation.

“We are really trying to drive towards the mandate that the agency already has, that it's not fulfilling,” she said – “to act on its current authority to reduce toxic pollution.”

Eppli said that if Portland wants its own right-to-know program, proponents would be wise to be transparent with affected businesses about what impact the program will have on them and to help them understand why implementing such a program would be beneficial to residents.

She said that when businesses in Eugene discovered what they had to do to comply, “they were angry, and they got together with the Chamber of Commerce and immediately, I think it was in the first 6 months, filed a lawsuit against the city to make the program go away.”

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