

Health Department

Health Officer Dr. Paul Lewis

Feb. 23, 2016

Chair Rep. Jessica Vega Pederson
Members of the House Energy and Environment Committee
Testimony of Dr. Paul Lewis to the Oregon House Energy and Environment Committee

Chair Vega Pederson and Members of the Committee,

My name is Dr. Paul Lewis and I serve as the Multnomah County Health Officer. As you know, our county and the City of Portland are racing to understand the sources of metal contamination in the air and to determine health risks now and those that could occur in the future.

For Multnomah County, this partnership with state agencies is crucial since our county's air quality is monitored and regulated by DEQ and our link to national health experts on environmental contamination is through the Oregon Health Authority's cooperative agreement with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Moss research by the U.S. Forest Service provided valuable clues to the complicated problem of poor air quality in the Portland metro area. Understanding how the moss information fits into a more complete environmental and health assessment in the face of so much uncertainty, fear, and anger is daunting.

Since Feb. 9, Multnomah County has organized two large community meetings for nearly 1,000 residents. We invited affected neighbors to a school in Southeast Portland and to another school in North Portland to share the latest information and listen to community concerns. Each meeting lasted more than five hours. People had an opportunity to tell DEQ, OHA, federal experts and our staff their fears and anger over this situation.

The moss only hinted at the problem. A more complete assessment of our air quality and soil quality will take time, likely months. We now need to systematically look at air and soil testing, to review human exposure testing that has been completed, and to determine if more testing of specific groups is needed. We need to determine if we need to monitor for diseases that could already be present and to answer community concerns about cancer. All of this needs to be done and it needs to be done well.

As a pediatrician and parent living in Southeast Portland near one of the hot spots, I am grateful that at least two specific sources of arsenic and cadmium have been identified and that use of these materials from these sites has stopped. I am also aware that other possible hot spots have been identified although there is not yet a known source. People in these neighborhoods also need to know the safety of their air and soil.

Going forward, Multnomah County recommends that current air quality regulations be updated to identify routine and peak emissions of all stationary sources that exceed health-based benchmarks, including fugitive emissions. New permit processes need to require emission control strategies that will prevent unnecessary human exposure.

Equally important for the metro area -- and the state -- is the pervasive problem of particulate matter, especially of diesel exhaust. All Multnomah County residents live with levels of pollution from dirty diesel engines that exceed the ABCs or ambient benchmark concentrations estimated to increase the risk of illness. This particularly harms growing children, vulnerable adults and people of color and low-income citizens who disproportionately live near these sources. Our Health Department's own 2014 Report Card on Racial and Ethnic Disparities found that census tracts in Multnomah County with more Black/African American, Asian/ Pacific Islander or Latino residents had two to three times median levels of diesel particulates than the tracts with mostly white residents.

In the short term, these particulates cause eye, throat and lung irritation and asthma symptoms. In the long term, we worry about heart and lung disease and certain types of cancer. We need comprehensive statewide regulation to get dirty diesel equipment, often cast off from our more rigorous neighbors in California, out of our community.

Finally, the state must devote adequate funding for staffing and resources to monitor air and soil quality and to provide the health analysis and public education needed to inform our community.

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this testimony.