

Homeowners seek EPA's help with pollution complaints

By Zach Parker The Citizen
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HOMEOWNERS IN the Cheniere Drew community in West Monroe are reaching out to the EPA for help over the emission of sawdust from Bayou Wood Pellets on Hwy 15 (above) over their homes and properties. The group of homeowners claim the sawdust falls so regularly that washed vehicles accumulate thick layers of dust over several hours.

Citizen photo by Zach Parker

A group of homeowners in the Cheniere Drew community in West Monroe asked the Environmental Protection Agency to investigate sawdust emissions from a wood pellets factory near their homes.

Representatives of the Drew Community of Concerned Citizens group sent a letter to the EPA's Region 6 headquarters in Dallas, Texas, last month, asking the agency to investigate Bayou Wood Pellet LLC's plant off Highway 15. The group is made up of homeowners who live near the plant, which manufactures wood pellets.

The plant has "been polluting our community for many months with wood dust and noise," the group's letter said. "Many people have recently moved from this area because of the pollution and noise."

The group claims its complaints and pleas to the state Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) have not yielded a reduction in the pollution. The group decided to reach out to the EPA since DEQ inspections of Bayou Wood did not halt sawdust emissions.

“They (DEQ) have not helped us in any manner,” the letter said.



In its letter, the group describes the area as a “nice community,” made up of churches, businesses, many homes, Glenwood Family Medical Practice and Drew Elementary School. Some 800 students attend Drew Elementary, which is located across the highway from Bayou Wood’s plant.



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“The sawdust falling on us is a fine powdered dust and it goes everywhere,” said Johnny Holyfield, a spokesman for the group. Holyfield and his family live in the neighborhood around Bayou Wood’s plant. He also is a minister at Faith Christian Church, located next door to the wood pellet factory.

Holyfield said Bayou Wood’s plant sprays dust continually over the area’s homes and vehicles. The dust covering their properties was not simply the result of seasonal pollen or of dust kicked up in yards or on blacktop roadways, Holyfield said.

On several occasions, members of the group showed The Ouachita Citizen sawdust falling from the sky onto their properties as well as thick layers of sawdust on area foliage.

“When the leaves fall during autumn, the dust gets twice as bad,” said Jerry Walker, a group member whose home is located west of Bayou Wood’s plant.

According to group members, the sawdust sprayed over their community has made enjoying the outdoors difficult. The sawdust, the group’s members claim, falls into their swimming pools like sand, infiltrates automobile engines, slips into attic spaces and has become a breathing hazard for humans as well as for pets and Drew Elementary students at recess.

“We’ve lived here 17 years, built this deck so we could sit outside but we can’t because of the dust,” said Walker’s wife, Kaila Walker. “I have asthma, and have to take breathing treatments sometimes when it’s so heavy. Sometimes, the smell of fresh sawdust gets overpowering. It’s terrible.”

In its letter, the group said it approached Steve Tippen, president at Bayou Wood, on numerous occasions.

“He has flatly refused to help,” the letter said. “Mr. Tippen has at night, on many occasions, turned out the lights and run machinery at maximum effort, possibly without filters and polluting our wildlife and domestic animals.”

Tippen was unavailable for comment.

“They (Bayou Wood) seem to be running the most at night, and they used to have lights on at night so you could easily see all the dust but they don’t turn those lights on at night anymore,” Holyfield said.

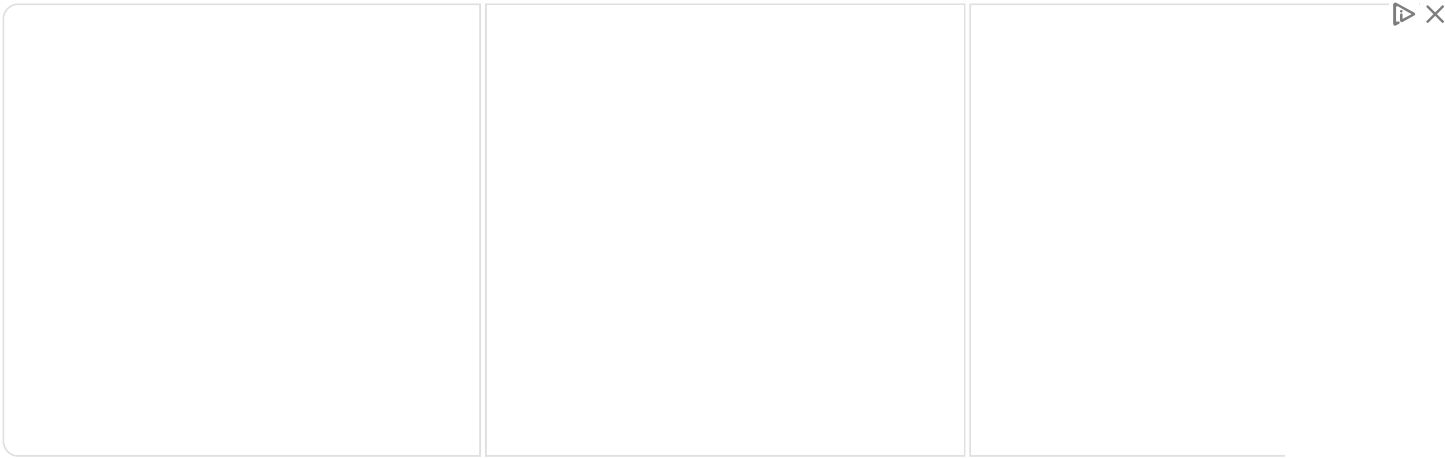
Since the beginning of the year, the group contends the plant runs machinery 24 hours a day, seven days a week, often becoming much louder at night than during the day and resulting in a heavier spread of sawdust over their community.

“They’re (Bayou Wood) not supposed to have the trucks going at night but that happens all the time,” Kaila Walker said. “Late at night, those trucks keep going and the front loader as well and it all sounds like a train coming through my bedroom wall.”



The group’s members agreed the sawdust emissions and factory noise did not become a problem until about a year ago.

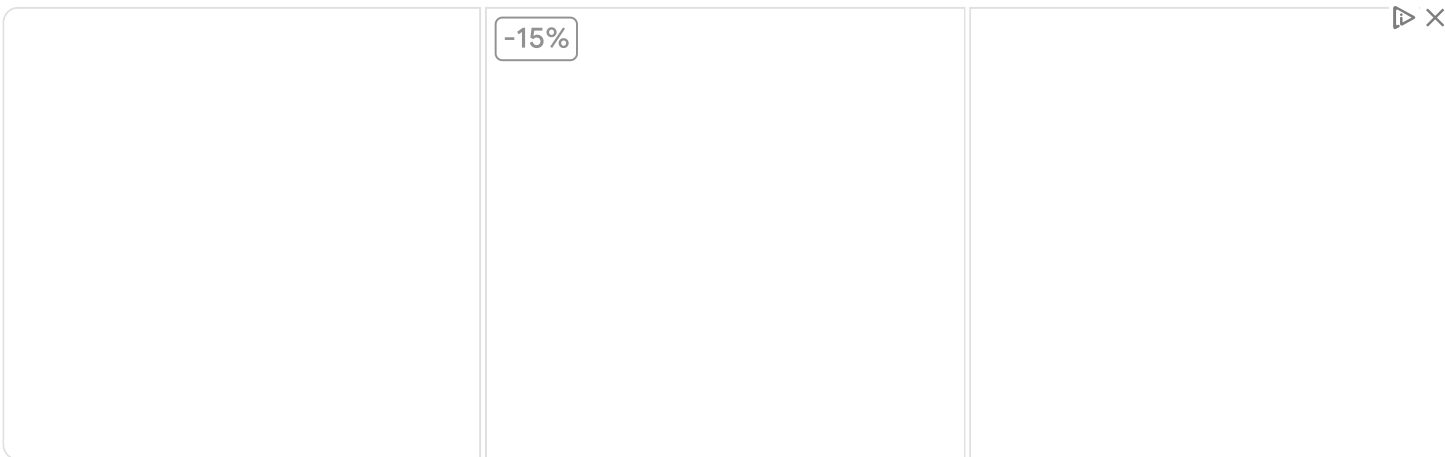
“More than a year ago, Mr. Tippen would only run it during daylight hours,” Kaila Walker said. “I don’t understand. We didn’t have this problem back then.”



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According to published reports, Bayou Wood was bought in August 2013 by Gulf Coast Renewable Energy LLC. At the time of the purchase, Bayou Wood’s plant had the capacity to produce 54,000 metric tons of wood pellets per year. Gulf Coast Renewable Energy announced last year it would expand production capacity to 120,000 metric tons per year with the expansion set to be completed by the end of January 2014.



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In January and February, DEQ observed wood particle emissions released at the facility’s unloading and loading bay areas during two separate inspections. The emissions detailed during the two inspections were in violation of state law and department regulations since the facility was not permitted to emit wood particles from those areas.

“The trucks going in and out of the plant create dust going everywhere,” Holyfield said. “They’re supposed to have curtains, an enclosed space, everything to keep these trucks from creating dust, too.”

According to reports filed with DEQ, the department issued a warning letter to Bayou Wood Products (Pellets) in February concerning the facility’s compliance with the Louisiana Environmental Quality Act and Air Quality Regulations. Bayou Wood responded to DEQ after a third inspection on May 1 with

details of measures taken to ensure compliance with environmental regulations.

At the end of May, DEQ inspector Blake Watson conducted an inspection at the facility and surrounding area. The reports and citizen complaints prompting the inspection indicated “the facility was releasing sawdust into the air covering the community,” according to Watson’s field interview form.

“At the time of arrival (on May 27), emissions were observed at the loading and unloading area,” Watson said in his field interview form.

When Watson contacted Jerry Coleman, general manager at Bayou Wood, about the emissions during his inspection, Coleman said the wood pellet company was still in the process of installing a damper in the plant’s exhaust stack to reduce emissions.

Following Watson’s inspection, DEQ issued a compliance order to Bayou Wood on June 11 for violations of environmental regulations. The compliance order required Bayou Wood to become compliant by Aug. 15 in light of the unlawful emissions observed throughout the year.

On June 30, PPM Consultants Inc., submitted a response to DEQ on behalf of Bayou Wood, claiming the wood pellet company “immediately addressed wood particulate emissions that were documented” in the January inspection. Bayou Wood, according to PPM’s letter, also installed control measures and began building other facilities to help contain emissions in response to DEQ’s compliance order.

PPM Consultants is an environmental consulting firm headquartered in Monroe.

According to Greg Langley, a spokesman for DEQ Secretary Peggy Hatch, Bayou Wood had met all requirements in the compliance order by the deadline.

“They are under compliance according to the compliance order for their earlier violations,” Langley said.

Langley said DEQ had received additional citizen complaints after the compliance order’s deadline and that the issue was still under investigation.

Though Bayou Wood said it would add a damper to the plant’s exhaust stack, members of the homeowner’s group claim the damper is only used on some occasions.

“The Sunday after they first had the crane up putting the filter in the exhaust stack, a fire truck responded,” Holyfield said. “There was a fire inside, smoke, but still a fire. After that, the stack began blowing like usual again.”

The group's members contend the factory does not use the damper most of the time because it impedes the plant's production.