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State officials approve plan to reduce ethylene oxide emissions at Smyrna plant

ATLANTA - Today the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD) approved plans by Sterigenics to install new, anti-pollution controls to vastly reduce ethylene oxide emissions at its Smyrna facility.

Construction should be completed in twelve (12) to twenty-four (24) weeks and stands to reduce modeled emissions from about .02 micrograms per cubic meter to around .0005 micrograms per cubic meter, which translates to a reduction in possible lifetime exposure cancer risk of roughly 100 in 1,000,000 people to 2 in 1,000,000 people.

EPD is finalizing details for two public meetings in Cobb and Newton Counties for August 19 and 20, respectively. U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, U.S. Centers for Disease Control, Georgia Department of Public Health, and Georgia EPD officials will be available to provide updates and answer questions. EPD officials will also attend the Covington City Council meeting this Monday evening, August 5.

The Sterigenics facility in Smyrna and BD (Becton Dickinson) facilities in Covington and Madison use ethylene oxide gas to sterilize medical equipment. Currently, EPD is working with BD to identify solutions to also reduce its emissions in Covington and Madison.

The Smyrna and Covington facilities are located in areas where the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) identified potentially greater cancer risks due to ethylene oxide exposure. The information was included in the 2014 National Air Toxics Assessment (NATA), which was completed and released by EPA in August 2018. The new findings are not due to new sources or an increased amount of ethylene oxide being released into the atmosphere. Rather, EPA determined that the risk of long-term exposure to ethylene oxide was greater than previously thought and updated its risk calculations. EPA is now working to develop a better understanding of ethylene oxide and propose regulatory updates for medical sterilizers.

There are two other medical sterilizers in Georgia which use ethylene oxide: Sterilization Services of Georgia in Atlanta and KPR USA in Augusta. Stepan in Winder uses ethylene oxide to produce laundry detergent. EPD will use modeling to determine the effects of current emissions from those facilities. While modeling provides a more accurate measurement of emissions from point sources, EPD is developing a plan to conduct air quality monitoring near these facilities and in other areas. However, air quality monitoring can be challenging since ethylene oxide is generated from sources other than medical sterilizers and can be found in air samples from areas without those types of facilities.

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