

Toxic Methyl Bromide threatens Hardy County residents, environment

"There they are. You can see the white spots on their heads and tails." Robert Singleton points at the pale blue sky. A pair of Bald Eagles are circling between his house and the next ridge north of him, about a half-mile away. They came back sometime during the last 20 years, he says. The majestic bird of prey has been the national symbol of the United States for a long time. Once on the verge of extinction because of pesticide use and hunting, its numbers have increased, and the population seems stable and thriving again. They have also found a home near Singleton's house, nestled in the forest of the Allegheny mountains in Eastern Hardy County. "We also have Golden Eagles, lots of Wild Turkey, Black Bear, Raccoons, Opossums, and I even saw a Bobcat in my front yard a year ago or so." In this area, wildlife is thriving, there are springs and creeks with clean water, and now in spring, with the forest waking up from winter, the air is filled with scents of new life. An idyllic place away from noise and pollution, a landscape untouched by industry, overpopulation, or climate change, nature's refuge. Singleton, a nationally acclaimed landscape painter, moved here 45 years ago to escape the fast lane and find peace and clean air, and live in nature. Since then, many more people

have discovered the beauty of this place. They built cabins and homes in these woods, and many moved here permanently. National forests and protected areas in eastern Hardy County attract hikers, mountain bikers, kayakers, and nature lovers. Hunters, visitors and locals alike, appreciate the woods flush with deer, and fill their freezers with game during the season. Organic farming has emerged in nearby Wardensville, where local youth learn to grow food and treat land and soil with respect, as well as business skills. But trouble is brewing in paradise.

Less than a mile northwest of Singleton's home, located at Park Farm Drive between Baker and Moorefield, Allegheny Wood Products International Inc. plans to open a wood fumigation facility on the grounds of an old poultry farm, with a permit approved by the W.Va. Department of Environmental Protection's Division of Air Quality (DAQ) to emit up to 9.54 tons of Methyl Bromide per year, as determined by preliminary evaluation.

Methyl Bromide, also known as Bromomethane, is a colorless, odorless, toxic, ozone-damaging gas that is banned in most countries and also neighboring states like Maryland. It is strictly regulated and being phased out in Virginia and North Carolina. Risks to human health include

neurological, reproductive, respiratory, kidney, liver, and esophageal damage, and nasal lesions. While close proximity contact is the most dangerous, low-dose exposure over longer periods also can be harmful. Minimal regulation exists regarding the protection of residents and the general public from the toxin in ambient air, so of course, a paid Air Quality permit public notice can state rightfully that "all State and Federal air quality requirements will be met [...]" because there are few to none. The most puzzling fact may be that Methyl Bromide is supposed to be phased out completely in the U.S., so residents wonder why they must worry about possibly inhaling it in a natural environment like the one they have. Furthermore, the toxin is subject to the Emergency Planning and Community Right-to-Know Act (EPCRA), a federal law designed to inform communities about planning efforts involving potential chemical hazards on the state or local level.

Neil Gillies, whose homestead is about a mile and a half from the proposed facility, asks, "How in the world did an industrial facility that will emit significant quantities of an extremely toxic gas go under the radar and get to the point of receiving a provisional permit? Why have there been

no public hearings about this?" Pete Osinga "moved here for the clean air and might have made a mistake." His new house is less than half a mile southeast of the site, and he may bear the brunt of chronic low-dose exposure since winds mostly come out of the west and northwest and may carry Bromomethane released by the company to his property. Other folks from the larger Hardy community plan to appear at the next Planning Commission meeting and object to this development. But there's still a feeling of powerlessness. A neighbor with property near the site shrugs his shoulders in despair. "...The owner of this land also sits on the Planning Commission. You know how this county works."

According to the Hardy County parcel viewer, the land around Park Farm Drive, other than parcels that belong to the late Max Park's sons, belongs to Robert Williams.

Williams is also connected to two mega poultry complexes in Old Fields that received permits with the public remaining ignorant until it was too late. The project moved forward despite local protest once citizens did learn what was happening. Even Harold Michael, then President of the County Commission, said he "had no clue that there was even an application submitted or

approved."

Johns Hopkins Center for a Livable Future sent the Hardy County Planning Commission at that time a letter pointing out risks: "We believe that expanding poultry operations in Hardy County will create similar hazards as those observed on the Eastern Shore of Maryland, marked by an increase of contaminants and risks to soil, air, ground, and surface water quality and the health of Hardy County residents."

A pattern emerges. Residents' health and the environment don't matter versus the opportunity for wealth, when there is minimal regulation and oversight in rural areas. Opponents of projects that threaten their well-being step into the ring against a foregone conclusion above their weight class. There are also concerns about effects on livestock, with a small poultry operation less than a mile from the fumigation site. Dennis Funk has cattle grazing on a neighboring property throughout the season. Last but not least, property values may drop in the immediate surroundings because who would want to potentially buy a home and property with the outlook of having hazardous gas dispersed over their heads?

Williams is a real estate agent. He would know that.

Baltimore Harbor averaged

26 to 37 tons of uncontrolled annual emissions of Methyl Bromide before export-required fumigation ended in the port around 2016. The chemical's use phased out in Maryland. In comparison, that means local residents, wildlife, and the environment may be subjected to the toxic emissions of roughly a third of an international port.

Citizens can still contact government representatives, request a public meeting, start petitions and try to be heard. Per the public notice: Written comments or requests for a public meeting must be received by the DAQ before 5 p.m. on Friday, May 5, 2023. A public meeting may be held if the Director of the DAQ determines that significant public interest has been expressed, in writing, or when the Director deems it appropriate.

Any resident can write:

Steven R. Pursley, PE
WV Department of
Environmental Protection
Division of Air Quality
601 57th Street, SE
Charleston, WV, 25304
Telephone: 304-926-0499 ext.
41900 Email: steven.r.pursley@
wv.gov

Residents must be motivated to engage, speak up, and keep Hardy County clean and safe.