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EPA Targets Metro East Toxic-Waste Sites

'We're Going To Do This Sooner And Better' Than Before, Federal Official Vows

By Margaret Gillerman
Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

The federal government has targeted East St. Louis and other Metro East communities along the Mississippi River for high-level and high-priority help in cleaning up toxic-waste sites and a host of other environmental messes.

"We want to deal with all the environmental issues in this area as a high-priority matter," said David Ullrich, a federal EPA official. He was in East St. Louis on Tuesday for a meeting to plot strategy and hear from residents.

"We're going to do this sooner and better and more efficiently" than in the past, he said.

The new effort — called the Mississippi River Gateway Initiative — involves a coalition of more than a dozen federal and state agencies. Over the last few months, U.S. EPA staff members from Washington and Chicago have been talking to Metro East residents about what environmental troubles worry them most.

Ullrich described the target area, which stretches from Alton to Cahokia, as "an area where we feel there's a great need" for extra assistance. It is an area that is riddled with

waste from failed factories and by unchecked development in the flood plains.

The problems the group hopes to remedy include major toxic-waste sites, environmental woes caused by lead-based paint, crumbling sewer systems, open burning by refineries, infestations by rodents and stinking, illegally dumped garbage.

This is "an effort to focus all our collective resources on the area," said Ullrich, who is deputy director of EPA's Region 5, based in Chicago.

The program also may address some environmental problems in St. Louis and St. Louis County, looking especially at lead poisoning there, officials said.

On Tuesday, Ullrich led a meeting of about 20 senior managers of federal and state agencies at State Community College in East St. Louis. They represented more than a dozen offices including the Illinois and Missouri health departments, the federal Housing and Urban Development and the Illinois attorney general.

The initiative comes amid a growing cry in the country of "environmental racism," which refers to allegations of neglect by federal agencies in cleaning up neighborhoods of poor, black and Hispanic people in favor of wealthier, white suburban communities.

At Tuesday's meeting, the Rev. Buck Jones, a community activist, asked the officials why East St. Louis, a virtually all-black community, had 22 sites identified as possible hazardous sites and yet none was on the

National Priority List for cleanup. Jones is executive director of Project HOPE (Helping Other People Emerge).

Jones said that residents in one East St. Louis neighborhood near a neglected toxic-waste site had an alarming cancer rate.

"You asked us to talk about environmental injustice," said Kathy Andria, an environmental activist from Granite City, who said she lived between two toxic-dump sites. In Granite City, "the air is polluted, the ground water is contaminated, the city government is hungry for any industry," she said.

While she was growing up, she said, "The local steel mills regularly dumped anything and everything into our yards. . . . We were white, but we were poor."

Venessa Marion, administrator of the Operation New Spirit Neighborhood Office in East St. Louis, talked about environmental issues beyond the typical scope of the EPA: abandoned housing.

"There's one cry that echoes consistently: Clean up," Marion said.

Louis Tiemann, a retired banker in Belleville and president of the East St. Louis Community Fund, said East St. Louis needed jobs more than anything.

"The jobs are not going to be there until this city gets cleaned up," Tiemann said.

The Gateway Initiative group plans to develop a plan of action based on residents' concerns.

East St. Louis Mayor Gordon Bush was optimistic.

"I'm very encouraged" by the high-level officials at the meeting, he said. "These are people who can make things happen."

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Plant is tops for toxics

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6/25
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By David Gosnell

Belleville News-Democrat

SAUGET — The American Bottoms Regional Wastewater Treatment Plant in Sauget, one of the smallest towns in Illinois, in 1992 treated the most chemical waste of any public sewage treatment plant in the nation.

That's because Monsanto's W.G. Krummrich Plant sent most of its chemical waste through the plant.

Monsanto's plant discharged more chemicals — about 33.7 million pounds in 1992 — into a public sewer plant than any industry in the nation, according to a report done by the U.S. and Missouri Public Interest Research Project groups. The report looked at federal toxic waste inventory reports for 1992, the last year figures have been compiled and released on industrial toxic emissions.

Susan May of the Missouri public interest group said she found it hard to believe that the American Bottoms plant is capable of actually processing that much industrial waste.

Keith Miller, the plant superintendent for environmental safety and health, said every pound of chemical waste emitted was neutralized by the American Bottoms plant.

The processed waste is discharged into the Mississippi River and the public interest groups are critical of what May calls "a loophole" in the nation's clean water laws that allows such a high volume of industrial waste to be dumped in the river.

"That's a tremendous amount of dumping," May said. "They are going through the surface treatment plant and getting away with it," she said.

American Bottoms' plant manager, George Schillinger, did not disagree that his plant treats more waste than any other treatment plant in the nation because of Monsanto and several other industries in Sauget. But, he said the information about the sewer plant is misleading.

Schillinger said Monsanto's Krummrich Plant is one of the few in the nation that has the bulk of its chemical waste treated outside the manufacturing plant.

By being treated outside the plant, it then must be reported to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. If all of it were treated inside Monsanto's plant, then it would not be reported, he said.

"It's a unique situation in Sauget," Schillinger said. "Industries contract with the Sauget plant to do that for them."

He called the report "a gross misrepresentation of the data."

About 30.1 million of the 33.7 million pounds the American Bottoms plant processes for Monsanto is sulfuric and hydrochloric acids, according to the report.

The rest are a variety of chemicals, some of which are toxic heavy metals, which are specially treated and removed before being mixed with other waste and eventually discharged into the river.

Schillinger said all of the acid is neutralized with lime and turned into calcium chloride, which he described as "the same thing you put on your driveway for ice."

The report, compiled by Carolyn Hartmann and Mary Wells of the U.S. Public Interest Research Group in Washington, was released Thursday. It listed what it called "major sources of toxic water pollution." Illinois was listed first among the states in the amount of chemicals discharged into treatment systems and fourth in the amount discharged into lakes and streams.

Miller said none of the local discharges represent any danger to the public.

"The river never sees it," he said of the chemicals treated at the American Bottoms plant.

Schillinger said American Bottoms has won national awards for its waste treatment.

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UNITED STATES ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
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CHICAGO, IL 60604-3580

REPLY TO THE ATTENTION OF:

DEC 21 1994

R-19J

Mr. Keith Miller
General Superintendent
Monsanto Corporation
500 Monsanto Avenue
Sauget, Illinois 62206

Dear Mr. Miller:

Thank you for inviting me and key members of my staff to meet with you and other representatives of Monsanto Corporation after the Mississippi River Gateway industry meeting on December 13. We appreciated the opportunity to openly discuss with you how the agency and industry can build an effective partnership toward our mutual goal of environmental protection in the greater St. Louis/East St. Louis area.

Your presentation on the Krummrich Plant's operations and progress toward emission reductions was very encouraging as well as informative. I also appreciated hearing your specific suggestions on what we at the agency can do to foster more cooperative relationships with your company and others in the Gateway area.

Again, it was a pleasure meeting you. We value your support of the local community and of the Mississippi River Gateway Initiative. In follow up to your request at the industry meeting, Ms. Linda L. Hamsing will soon be providing you with more information on specifics of the initiative.

If you have any further questions about or suggestions for the initiative, please contact Ms. Hamsing at (312) 886-0981.

Sincerely yours,

David A. Ullrich
Deputy Regional Administrator

xc: Garth Fort
Kevin Cahill

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