

Media Release

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Poultry Operations Emit Unhealthy Levels of Ammonia According to New Study

Sierra Club and Medical Professionals Express Concern

A recent study released by the Sierra Club today has found ammonia emissions high enough to threaten public health from confined chicken operations in Western Kentucky. Coming on the same day the U.S. Senate Environment and Public Works Committee is holding a full committee hearing on “An Examination of the Potential Human Health, Water Quality, and Other Impacts of the Confined Animal Feeding Industry.” The study, done by scientists at Iowa State University, is the most comprehensive ever done of chicken house emissions and reports ammonia levels high enough to have harmful effects on the respiratory system, according to Dr. Alan R. Hirsch, MD, of the Smell and Taste Treatment and Research Foundation in Chicago.

“We were impressed with the ammonia emissions study which scientists at Iowa State did for Tyson as part of the fulfillment of the settlement from the Sierra Club v. Tyson lawsuit. This report is definitely the most comprehensive ever done on the issue of chicken house emissions and we are pleased that it has been completed and can be viewed by the public. However, we think the levels of ammonia are too high for community health and hope that Tyson will be a leader in working to make these facilities safer and more environmentally friendly,” said Aloma Dew, Sierra Club associate midwest representative. Ammonia is a toxic chemical and is emitted from confined animal feeding operations. According to the EPA, emissions of more than 100 pounds of ammonia per day must be reported, which Tyson has done with operations in McLean and Webster County that were part of the 2005 lawsuit.

“We have known that smell indicates the presence of harmful emissions and this report verifies that,” said Dew. The study shows that the two chicken houses studied emitted a little over ten tons of ammonia in the year they were monitored.. Some Tyson facilities in Kentucky have as many as 24 houses. Each of these large factory-farming operations could emit up to 120 tons of ammonia per year.

According to Dr. Alan R. Hirsch, ammonia is a toxic chemical, and can have harmful effects to the respiratory system, especially after persistent exposure, as is often the case in communities near chicken operations. Neighbors to these facilities complain of burning eyes and throat, nausea, sinus problems. Ammonia, according to non-profit Union of Concerned Scientists, can “harm cilia in the respiratory system, narrow airways, inflame mucous membranes, and impair the ability to clear particulate matter from the airways.”

According to scientific studies, confined livestock operations, which includes poultry CAFOs, account for 73 percent of ammonia emissions in the U.S. each year. Dr. Hirsch has stated that any detectable level (if it can be smelled) is a potential health risk for those living near the site where neighbors are subjected to full-time exposure. “Ammonia can induce an increase in autonomic discharge, blood pressure, pulse, and cortisol levels causing an increase in cardiovascular disease, headache, chemosensory loss, psychiatric disorders, and cognitive effects,” according to Dr. Hirsch. He further stated that he would feel very concerned if he and his family lived next to one of these facilities. “prolonged exposure to ammonia is especially hazardous to children and the elderly. This is a pollution problem that needs to be dealt with as a public health issue.”

Although the issue of toxic emissions continues to be a problem with confined chicken operations in western Kentucky, the Sierra Club has been very pleased with a recent effort by Tyson Chicken to take steps to mitigate the problems in Webster County, recently sending top executives to Clay to see the situation first hand. They will return for a community meeting on Sept. 25 to report steps they have taken and levels of success. “We are hoping that Tyson will take bold steps to lead the poultry industry in following existing regulations and not try to side-step federal rules that protect the environment and public health,” stated Ed Hopkins, Director of the Sierra Club Environmental Quality Program.
