

Research on AltEn may end prematurely

Legislature hasn't allocated funds for study

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Lincoln Journal Star

Efforts to understand the environmental and health effects created by contamination from AltEn are continuing more than a year after the ethanol plant near Mead shut down.

The future of the research project being led by the University of Nebraska Medical Center and University of Nebraska-Lincoln is uncertain, however.



The biofuel plant, which turned pesticide-treated seed into ethanol, creating highly contaminated solid and liquid byproducts, shut down in 2021 after years of mounting environmental violations.

Researchers have spent much of the last year tracing the environmental impacts by studying honey bees and other wildlife, surface and groundwater, as well as the potential health impacts on area residents.

A legislative bill (LB1048) introduced by Sen. Carol Blood of Bellevue this year and heard by the Appropriations Committee on March 3 would have appropriated \$10 million to the university to continue the study.

In its proposal, the research team studying AltEn asked for \$7.9 million to continue monitoring the spread of contaminants from the plant through the Saunders County countryside through 2025.

AltEn

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Funds would be used to assess water and soil contamination (\$991,000), survey perceived health effects (\$997,000), assess effects on insects and wildlife (\$919,000), and create and maintain a medical registry (\$1.6 million), according to the document from UNMC.

Other funding would also help provide education and training (\$2.7 million), create online modules to assess environmental health (\$100,000), share findings at Nebraska public health conferences and other venues for two years (\$150,000) and pay faculty and staff for work on the study (\$500,000).

The Appropriations Committee did not include any level of funding for the proposal in its budget packages — either the roughly \$1 billion

in American Recovery Plan Act funds, or \$500 million in transfers from the cash reserve — it sent to the floor for debate earlier this month.

Dr. Eleanor Rogan, chair of UNMC's Department of Health Promotion in the College of Public Health and leader of the multi-disciplinary study, said some of the team's work will be wrapped up in the coming months.

Survey responses from some 1,000 households within a 6-mile radius of the plant regarding perceived health effects will be analyzed and used to generate a report that will be shared publicly, Rogan said.

Those findings will also be used to estimate the future health needs of Mead and surrounding areas, as well as prepare a response to the perceived health threat.

As of last week, 213 surveys have been returned, with 147

individuals indicating they wished to have their blood or urine collected at the Saunders County Medical Center.

The samples will then be analyzed for any pesticide contaminants found at AltEn by the Nebraska Public Health Laboratory at UNMC.

"Even if the funds run out, we will analyze those results and share the results publicly and individually with those who participated," Rogan said.

But after those projects are completed, a longer-term study of AltEn's impact — particularly on the people living near the ethanol plant — may go unexamined.

For example, a medical registry to track long-term health issues such as pediatric cancer, birth defects and Parkinson's disease for people living in Saunders County will likely have to be scrapped, Rogan said.

Efforts to monitor how

the toxins at the plant are moving through creeks and streams toward the Platte River, or seeping into the soil and groundwater will also be abandoned if additional funding isn't secured.

"We will continue as long as our original funds hold out," she said. "We are also looking around for other possible sources of funding."

Blood said she was working with lawmakers on a potential amendment to add some funding for the research project into the state budget that is currently being debated at the Legislature.

Any agreement would likely fall short of the \$10 million Blood initially sought, or the \$7.9 million outlined by UNMC, however.

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