

Survey measuring AltEn health effects put online

UNMC to analyze data from survey after it ends in May

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Researchers from the University of Nebraska and Creighton University are continuing to assess individuals' perceptions living in proximity to the AltEn ethanol plant near Mead.

A survey designed by the University of Nebraska Medical Center to measure the perceived health risks related to AltEn has been put online to help reach a greater number of people living in Saunders County.

Dr. Eleanor Rogan, the



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An aerial view of AltEn plant is seen in this photo taken in August 2021 in Mead.

interim chair of the Department of Health Promotion in UNMC's College of Public Health, said the questionnaire is modeled on the Community

Assessment for Public Health Emergency Response created by the Centers for Disease Control.

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Survey

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“This is a common way to get some insight into what kinds of health problems people are experiencing, to narrow down the search for adverse health effects that may actually be caused by the exposure, or an event,” Rogan said.

It’s also “much faster and less expensive than actually medically examining everyone for everything,” she added.

The 40-question survey, which takes about 15 minutes to complete, asks for basic household information, the level of awareness and feelings residents may have about AltEn, as well as physical and mental health conditions they have experienced since the plant started operating in 2015.

Residents who respond to the survey will also be asked to identify when any symp-

toms may have started, and if they believe their health conditions could be connected to the biofuel plant’s activities.

AltEn used seeds coated in pesticides to manufacture ethanol, leaving behind toxic solid and liquid waste products. The Nebraska Department of Environment and Energy ordered the plant to shut down in February 2021 for numerous violations of state environmental regulations.

More than 215 people of the 1,000 who received the survey by mail earlier this year have returned it, Rogan said, and more than 150 people have signed up to provide a blood or urine sample to be analyzed for any of the chemicals found in high concentrations at AltEn.

The samples will be taken at the Saunders County Medical Center in Wahoo and analyzed at the Nebraska Public Health Laboratory in Omaha.

The survey will remain ac-

tive through the end of May, Rogan said. UNMC plans to analyze the data and make the aggregated, non-identifiable information public at a later date.

Individuals whose blood or urine samples show the presence of toxic compounds will be provided specific advice for contacting a physician, Rogan added.

If an ongoing funding source can be secured, individuals will also be asked to participate in a medical registry which will track any health issues they develop for years to come.

The massive project to study AltEn’s affect on air quality, surface and groundwater, and the health of humans, wildlife and pollinators was first proposed a year ago.

At that time, UNMC pegged the cost of the study at \$1 million per year for 10 years. Earlier this year, the cost of the study was reduced to \$7.8 million.