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Lead Levels Too High In Pilsen, Environmental Group Claims

Factory Spokesman: We 'Live Within The Guidelines'

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PILSEN, III. -- This spring, a Pilsen environmental group began testing the soil near an industrial plant for contamination, and it says it found excessive levels of lead.



Community volunteers took soil samples in the neighborhood.

The Pilsen Environmental Rights and Reform Organization took 12 soil samples adjacent to and near the H. Kramer factory and sent them to an EPA-approved lab. Nine of PERRO's samples showed levels exceeding the residential standard of 400 parts per million for lead, NBC5's Carol Marin reported.

Some residents have reported strange emissions coming from the plant at night.

In the summer of 2003, a dense cloud descended over parts of Pilsen. A resident grabbed his video camera and started recording.

"About four in the morning, I started noticing it smelled funny," the resident said.

The fumes were coming from the H. Kramer factory, Marin reported.

Karen Sheets, with PERRO, said the fumes were not a one-time occurrence.

"People have complained about it for more than 20 years," she said.

But, according to the company, what happened that night was an isolated incident, caused by a mechanical malfunction. But environmental activists in Pilsen say they aren't so sure.

Pilsen is a predominately Mexican-American neighborhood on Chicago's near Southwest Side, where schools are intermingled with heavy industry. Asthma rates for children there are alarmingly high.

Last November, the people of Pilsen voted overwhelmingly to ask the city of Chicago to come up with some answers about what kind of pollution was in their neighborhood.

"We have a lot of questions," Sheets said. "Is this healthy ... is it right that a company, even if they are allowed to create these kinds of emissions, is it right that they are doing it?"

Randy Weil is a Vice President at Kramer, a metal recycling business, which for the last 85 years has been located in Pilsen.

"We feel that we are being a good neighbor and doing the job we are supposed to do," Weil said. "I do know that we at Kramer live within the guidelines that the different agencies have ... and we are well within those limits."



The U.S. and Illinois environmental protection agencies regulate the company's emissions.

If you walk down 18th street in Pilsen as Marin did with Sergio Hernandez, you'll find plenty of pollution possibilities.

Marin: "As we talk right now, look at all the buses, trucks, cars going by, big corridor, right? Emissions, right? So, there's stuff coming into the air here in Pilsen from all sorts of directions?"

Sergio: "Absolutely."

Marin: "So, how can you focus on one company more than another?"

Sergio: "You choose your battles ... and again, having the H. Kramer plant try to clean up the emissions they have is something -- a goal that can be reached."

Mike Dvorak was one of the activists who took soil samples in March.

"One of our samples was found to have up to 92 times the allowable industrial lead levels," Dvorak said.

But Weil doubted the accuracy of the group's numbers.

"I wouldn't want to speak to those samples because I don't know how they were gathered," he said. "Soil sampling takes certain techniques, and if you don't follow those techniques, you may get a sample that is meaningless."

PERRO also sent its samples to a Louisiana chemistry lab called Subra Company, which, since the early 1980's, has been assisting community groups with environmental complaints.

According to the city of Chicago, cases of lead poisoning in Pilsen children have declined significantly since 1997.

But Subra responded, "This data indicates that the people living in the area are being exposed to heavy metal-contaminated soil that poses an unacceptable health risk."

Marin: "Is it possible that they might be right?"

Weil: "There's no reason for me to ever suspect that things going on outside our fences is in any way connected to what we are doing."

But the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency now plans to take its own soil samples. The environmental group said, "We are taking this very seriously."

The city will issue its EPA report July 1 to PERRO.

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