

Group says Norfolk Southern coal dust is pervasive

By Aaron Applegate
The Virginian-Pilot
© April 24, 2015

NORFOLK

An environmental group on Friday presented evidence they say shows that coal dust blowing off Norfolk Southern's terminal at Lamberts Point is common in nearby neighborhoods, including around Ghent and West Ghent.

The Hampton Roads chapter of the Sierra Club said black dust samples gathered from five homes contained 20 to 70 percent coal dust, according to an analysis by an Oregon company the group hired. The homes were all roughly one mile east of the waterfront coal piers

"This clearly shows coal dust adversely affects the quality of life in the community," said Joe Cook, a Sierra Club organizer who lives in the nearby Larchmont section of Norfolk. He said too much coal dust can be dangerous to humans.

Environmental groups and some residents have long criticized Norfolk Southern for what they say are unacceptable levels of dust coming from the largest coal terminal in the Northern Hemisphere. The company denies the dust is a problem.

The Sierra Club held a news conference Friday outside the 38th Street entrance to the Lamberts Point coal terminal.

Ghent resident Michael Beane, who was there, said black grit gets all over his home.

"I can't even use my upstairs porch, because it's covered in coal dust," he said.

Norfolk Southern spokeswoman Susan Terpay wrote in an email that the company hasn't had a chance to review the report and could not comment on it. She said Norfolk Southern conducts its own air monitoring at the terminal that shows coal dust levels are below state and federal requirements.

Most of the dust escaping from the site comes from a piece of machinery that dumps coal from rail cars onto conveyor belts that whisk it to waiting ships. The coal dumpers were built more than 50 years ago.

The amount of coal dust coming from the site is not measured, but the state Department of Environmental Quality has estimated that nearly 90,000 pounds of dust escaped in 2013, based on the amount of coal passing through Lamberts Point.

Because much of the coal terminal was built before federal air quality regulations, there are no dust emission limits on the site – provided the terminal doesn't handle more coal than allowed each year by the state.

In a meeting with residents and environmentalists last year, Norfolk Southern CEO

Wick Moorman said of coal dust at Lamberts Point: "There are no facts to suggest this is a meaningful problem of any kind."

The Sierra Club's Cook said the new test results show the coal dust is a problem.

"It presents a clear and present danger to humans and environmental health," he said.

In addition to coal dust, the tests showed the black grit found on homes contained bits of insects, pollen, plant and mineral material and pieces of vehicle tires and belts. The tests were done by Chemoptix Microanalysis LLC of West Linn, Ore.

A DEQ analysis of black grit found at a home near Lamberts Point in 1996, the agency's only test, found "large amounts of coal dust and combustion products of coal, wood and oil." Other minerals, fibers and paint were also found.

Norfolk Councilman Tommy Smigiel brought a resolution to the City Council last year calling for the city to ask Norfolk Southern to do more on dust suppression, but the council has not taken action on it.

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