

The Newport Plain Talk

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*An August 23 air quality violation at US Nitrogen
Photo Credit: WJHL Chris McCloud*

US Nitrogen, a chemical plant producing nitrogen for the creation of explosives, has recently been granted a permit from The Tennessee Department of Environmental Conservation to dump nearly two millions of discharge water per day into the Nolichucky River. The permit covers the plant through October 31, 2020.

US Nitrogen has been under scrutiny again, following several new violations. The Greene County-based facility's latest in what seems to be a continuous stream of blatant overreaches and defiant practices in the face of environmental standards was witnessed by many residents in our region when ominous, huge plumes of yellow-orange smoke poured from the factory's exhaust system on August 23. A local resident, Jimmy Wright, reported to WJHL news, "We do not feel safe here." Park Overhall, local actress and

vocal environmental activist posted the following on her Facebook page, along with numerous other posts railing against US Nitrogen's practices and the lack of appropriate oversight:

"The rape of Appalachia continues. This time what is at stake is: three schools, precious wetlands so rare in Tennessee and an already impaired river. My state is quite frankly out of control."

The company blamed the release of nitrous oxide on unexplained "equipment failure," but admitted to exceeding the legal limit of gases they are allowed to emit in a 24-hour period. Reportedly, operations at the plant were briefly halted pending investigation by TDEC (The Tennessee Department of Environmental Conservation) and the US Environmental Protection Agency. It is unclear whether TDEC forced the shutdown or whether US Nitrogen voluntarily suspended operations. Operations have resumed.

In addition to air pollution concerns, the company is also under fire for releasing excessive amounts of magnesium into storm water running off its 500-acre facility. According to Walter F. Roche Jr., for the second year in a row magnesium levels have been exponentially high. The national limit is .0636 milligrams per liter, but for two years in a row the plant has reported level at two monitoring sites at between 5.54 and 12.3 milligrams per liter. The company claims not to use magnesium in production but pointed that the heightened levels may be due to use of fertilizer or even "water flowing across rock."

On August 4, an accident involving a US Nitrogen worker was made to the Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce who are currently investigating the accident. Reports indicated that the 36-year old worker suffered severe burns and was flown by helicopter to Augusta, GA, for surgery involving several skin grafts.

All of this comes in the wake of huge controversy over a pipeline US Nitrogen constructed to remove free water from the Nolichucky River and return it with added levels of ammonia, nitrogen, and nitric acid. Despite community concern of the legality of the project, it was nonetheless completed and is now estimated to be removing 1.9 million gallons of water from the river per operation day, and returning 500,000 gallons that has not evaporated.

Patagonia clothing company has funded local non-profit, Clean Water Expected in East Tennessee (CWEET) who have been monitoring chemical levels, temperature, and pH both above and below the dump site. Tests have been recorded before and after US Nitrogen began its production. CWEET Community Organizer Amelia Taylor says, "Corporations are allowed to do their own self-monitoring for pollution which we believe is unreliable and unjust. A citizen-led stream monitoring project like ours puts scientific information in the hands of the community who can then use that information to hold corporations accountable." Given this year's extremely low rainfall and receding river tides, it is unclear what imminent tests will reveal about chemical levels.

CWEET plans to continue the stream monitoring project upon a third year of funding from Patagonia. CWEET is currently accepting volunteers for the project. Community members are called upon to donate a boat or allowing CWEET use of a boat to access the upper Nolichucky monitoring site in Bybee, TN. Concerned community members can support CWEET by making a tax deductible charitable donation to the organization. They can be reached 865-453-8535. Their website is cweet.org. For continuing coverage of US Nitrogen's practices, visit Roche's extensive and thoroughgoing blog usnitrogen.blogspot.com.

Andrew Suggs, a Cocke County native with a degree from Harvard University in Visual and Environmental Studies, has recently relocated from Philadelphia to his hometown of Newport to work for local environmental and social issues.