

Editorial: DNR didn't listen to citizens over soy plant

Des Moines 6:24 a.m. CDT October 2, 2015



(Photo: Brian Powers/The Register)

The residents of Des Moines have every reason to be angry about the state's handling of Archer Daniels Midland's plan to increase production ([/story/news/local/2015/09/23/expansion-raises-concerns-at-archer-daniels-midland-soy-processing-in-des-moines/72611490/](http://story/news/local/2015/09/23/expansion-raises-concerns-at-archer-daniels-midland-soy-processing-in-des-moines/72611490/)) at the company's east-side soybean processing plant.

The plant is already the biggest single producer of hazardous air pollutants in Polk County, and residents have concerns about not only the smell associated with the proposed changes, but also the potential health risks linked to certain emissions.

Neighbors of the plant asked the Iowa Department of Natural Resources to extend a 30-day period for public comment on ADM's request for the required construction permits. Residents said they needed more time to collect information on the project's potential impact on air quality in the area.

Unfortunately, the DNR refused their request and gave ADM its permit. The agency's official explanation is that it had met all of its "legal obligations" by providing only a 30-day time frame in which citizens could make their voices heard.

That response is flat-out unacceptable. Compliance with the law is the absolute minimum that's expected not just of corporate citizens, but of the publicly funded agencies that regulate them. It's the very bottom rung on the ladder of social responsibility.

The citizens' request for a deadline extension was not only reasonable, but also entirely justified given the convoluted nature of the permit-approval process.

To begin with, the DNR mailed the official notice of ADM's plans not to the hundreds of residents living near the plant, but to the company itself and to local and federal agencies. Notice to the public was limited to a legal notice published in this newspaper.

Then, the public hearing on the matter took place on the 28th day of the 30-day time period for comment — which meant that residents who learned of ADM's plans through media coverage of the hearing had only a day or two to make their feelings known.

And finally, when residents raised questions at the hearing, they were told by the DNR that the purpose of the meeting was to collect comments, not to answer questions.

To its credit, the DNR did answer residents' questions, in detail and in writing, on Sept. 22. But that was 11 days *after* the agency stopped accepting public comments, and just 48 hours before the permit was issued.

All of this gives the appearance, however unjustified, that "the fix was in," as does the fact that ADM didn't bother to send a representative to the public hearing.

Granted, the process for public notice and public hearings is dictated by state and federal regulations. But since that process clearly results in citizens being unable to provide informed comments, the DNR should have immediately agreed to extend its deadline for public input.

Jeff Witte, president of the Fairmont Park Neighborhood Association, was one of those who expressed frustration at the Sept. 9 public hearing. "This is just ridiculous," he told the DNR. "You know, it's not like we don't pay taxes. We do pay a little bit of money, and we should be represented that way."

"This whole process is so tedious and it's a burden on everyday people to suddenly have to try to become an expert," Cherie Mortice, another association member, told the DNR. "We should have people that are working in city government and state government that are working for us, and I don't see that happening right now."

These are legitimate complaints, particularly in the context of a proposed expansion by a company with a poor record of compliance with pollution standards. The Des Moines plant is expected to spit out an additional 183 tons of volatile organic compounds every year, and while that's well within the limits of what is allowed, the permitting process in Iowa doesn't include any sort of health-risk assessments.

The people of Iowa have already lost the battle for clean water, thanks in part to state policymakers who measure our quality of life only in terms of business growth and economic development.

If we're going to preserve our clean air, we need government to be more responsive to the concerns of its citizens — even when those concerns conflict with the plans of a company that generates \$81 billion in annual revenue.

Read or Share this story: <http://dmreg.co/1FK3P4z>