

Durbin, Duckworth, Schneider Release Statement On CDC Report On Public Health Impact Of Sterigenics

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WASHINGTON – U.S. Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin (D-IL), a member of the Senate Environmental Justice Caucus, U.S. Senator Tammy Duckworth (D-IL), founder of the Senate Environmental Justice Caucus, and U.S. Representative Brad Schneider (D-IL-10), Co-Chair of the bipartisan Congressional Ethylene Oxide Task Force, today issued the following statement on the report released by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) evaluating the public health impacts of the ethylene oxide (EtO), a cancer-causing agent, emitted from the now-closed Sterigenics medical sterilization facility in Willowbrook, Illinois.

The report, which was released today for public comment until January 3, analyzed EtO concentrations measured in Willowbrook from November 2018 to March 2019. In the report, ATSDR concluded that, prior to February 15, 2019, long-term breathing of air within one mile of the Sterigenics facility is a concern for increased lifetime risk of cancer associated with EtO exposure, due to the gas' concentration in the air during the sterilization operations at the facility. The report also found that the air within a mile of where the facility no longer poses significant risk to residents as the Sterigenics facility is no longer operational. This study adds to the literature of the harms of EtO, which includes a 2016 U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) [Integrated Risk Information System \(IRIS\) study](#) that confirmed EtO to be more carcinogenic than originally thought and indicated a connection between EtO exposure and the development of some cancers.

“It is deeply upsetting that EtO emissions from the Sterigenics facility have led to potentially life-threatening consequences for the residents of Willowbrook. Those who lived nearby and worked at Sterigenics during its operations are now burdened with an increased risk of cancer. Every effort possible should be made by Sterigenics, EPA and the Illinois Department of Public Health to help those at risk monitor their health and access necessary treatment,” the lawmakers said. “While we are certainly relieved that EtO emissions are no longer lingering in Willowbrook and that residents are not facing continuing risk, this situation must not happen again – in Illinois or anywhere else in this country. EPA must take its mission seriously to protect Americans from environmental threats and hold companies like Sterigenics accountable when the health and safety of residents are jeopardized.”

Durbin, Duckworth, and Schneider have been strong advocates for addressing the unacceptable level of EtO emissions. In July, the lawmakers led a [letter](#) signed by 40 Members of Congress to EPA supporting its [proposed EtO sterilizer rule](#) and advocating for additional measures in the final rule, including fence-line monitoring at sterilization facilities, coverage of off-site warehouses where sterilized equipment is stored, and an expedited compliance timeline to reduce dangerous emissions as quickly as possible. The new proposed rule would reduce EtO emissions from commercial EtO sterilization facilities by 80 percent once implemented.

Durbin, Duckworth, and Schneider have also previously introduced legislation that would require EPA to update EtO emissions standards to reflect the stricter criteria outlined in EPA's 2016 IRIS study. Under the bill, any updates to the emissions standards would have to incorporate the maximum achievable control technology requirements to exhaust vents and apply to both area and major sources, which covers plants like Sterigenics. It would also require EPA to undergo a residual risk assessment following implementation of the new rule, which is a stringent and public-health focused review of the rule's impacts.

The lawmakers have also [met](#) with the CEO of Sotera Health, the parent company of Sterigenics; convened [meetings](#) with then-EPA Administrator Andrew Wheeler on the issue; and [sat down](#) with Willowbrook residents.

EtO serves a variety of industrial purposes, including as a sterilizer for 50 percent of sterile medical devices. In 2016, EPA identified EtO as a human carcinogen and included the chemical in the National Air Toxics Assessment. Subsequently, EPA identified communities that faced potentially dangerous levels of EtO emissions from the [86 EtO commercial sterilizers](#) in the U.S.