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4TH DISTRICT, GEORGIA

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TRANSPORTATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

SENIOR WHIP

REGION VIII WHIP

Congress of the  
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Washington, DC 20515-1004

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Director Andrew Wheeler  
Environmental Protection Agency  
Office of the Administrator 1101A  
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue, N.W.  
Washington, DC 20460

August 12, 2019

Dear Administrator Wheeler,

We write to express our concerns regarding commercial ethylene oxide emissions and the public health risk they present. We request the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) respond to our questions below within thirty days, detailing their plans to mitigate exposure to ethylene oxide and to prevent further harm caused by emissions.

Ethylene oxide is a colorless, odorless chemical that the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has officially classified as a carcinogenic.<sup>1</sup> It is most frequently used to sterilize medical devices and produces a gas emission that pollutes the air, threatening families, neighborhoods, and communities surrounding commercial plants.

In December 2016, the EPA published the results of a ten-year study officially classifying ethylene oxide as a harmful carcinogenic air pollutant. It concluded that humans exposed to ethylene oxide for long periods of time are at increased risk of contracting leukemia, lymphoma, and breast cancers.<sup>2</sup>

Another EPA study, the National Air Toxics Assessment, indicated census tracts where airborne toxins, like ethylene oxide, contribute to higher rates of cancer.<sup>3</sup> This study stipulated that *half a million people* live in tracts with identifiable increased cancer rates, largely due to ethylene oxide. Three Georgia census tracts were identified, including Covington—part of the 4<sup>th</sup> District of Georgia, where ethylene oxide concentration is 17 to 97 times higher than the state's acceptable area concentration (AAC).<sup>4</sup>

Despite EPA's knowledge of the significant dangers ethylene oxide poses, the agency has seemingly failed to mitigate the release of the toxin. Moreover, the EPA has not issued any press releases about these findings notifying residents living within exposed areas - failing to even notify families and communities that the very air they breathe could be poisonous. Only through diligent reporting did

<sup>1</sup> *Background Information on Ethylene Oxide*, United States Environmental Protection Agency (last updated February 27, 2019), <https://www.epa.gov/hazardous-air-pollutants-ethylene-oxide/background-information-ethylene-oxide#risks>

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Supra* note 1.

<sup>4</sup> Brenda Goodman and Andy Miller, *Residents Unaware of Cancer-Causing Toxin in Air*, WebMD Health News, (July 19, 2019)

citizens learn of the potential peril from a carcinogenic in the air, information that the EPA held for two years. This lack of action is contrary to the EPA's mission to ensure Americans have clean air and healthy living conditions.

In order to fully understand the lack of oversight on this issue, we request the answers to the following questions:

- How long did the EPA know about the toxicity of ethylene oxide and the areas most affected by it?
- Why did the agency neglect to inform residents of the increased danger of the air in their communities? In light of these concerns are you planning to issue a press release?
- Will you commit to partnering with an independent air testing team to identify ethylene oxide emissions in the 109 census tracts identified as having increased carcinogenic air pollutants?
- Do you plan to impose new rules on sterilizing plants that release ethylene oxide emissions?
- What are the EPA's further plans to regulate the toxin?
- Does the EPA have plans to remediate this problem? What next steps will the agency take?
- What can the EPA do to ensure that this problem will not reoccur in the future?

As Members of Congress we prioritize the safety of our constituents. Some of our districts are directly affected by the release of toxic cancer-causing levels of ethylene oxide, and we are committed to ensuring that the mistakes made here are not further perpetuated. We request a response to these questions within thirty days and thank you for your attention to these pressing issues.

Sincerely,



Rep. Henry C. "Hank" Johnson, Jr.  
Member of Congress



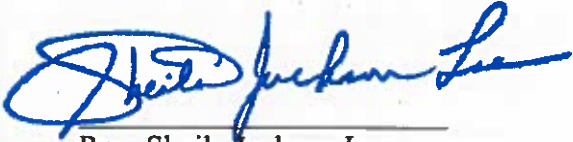
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Member of Congress



Rep. Susan Wild  
Member of Congress



Rep. David Scott  
Member of Congress



Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee  
Member of Congress