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DEQ Study Observes Highest Levels of Formaldehyde in Bountiful

Low Risk to Health; Follow-up study sought to investigate possible sources

SALT LAKE CITY – The Utah Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) today released the results of a special air toxics study conducted during 2015. Overall, the study observed high formaldehyde levels along the Wasatch Front, and even higher concentrations in Bountiful during the winter, which is uncommon and warrants further study, but appears to be no immediate health threat.

The study, funded by the Utah Legislature in 2014, was prompted after an air quality scientist discovered anomalies in data collected at the Bountiful air monitoring site between 2002 and 2012. The $110,000 study allowed DEQ's Division of Air Quality (DAQ) to install two additional air toxic monitors in West Valley City and Lindon, and intensify the sample collection frequency at the Bountiful site, located near Viewmont High School.

All three sites showed short-term spikes of formaldehyde, a known respiratory irritant and a listed carcinogen. It is a chemical widely used in consumer products and industrial sources. It is also a byproduct of combustion like automobiles, fuel-burning like gas stoves and even from cigarette smoke. Concentrations of formaldehyde tend to be higher during the summer due to photochemical activity, as observed at Lindon and West Valley. However, the Bountiful site had the highest concentrations in the winter prompting DEQ to seek additional money for further research.

Two additional compounds were observed at Bountiful – methylene chloride, commonly found in paint-stripping activities and acetaldehyde, which showed a strong correlation with formaldehyde.

Officials at the Utah Department of Health (UDOH) reviewed the study to help determine the possible health impacts around the three sites the study focused on. "Human exposure to these chemicals appears to be seasonal and sporadic, and is not likely to result in lasting harm to anyone's health who lives in the study areas," said UDOH Executive Director Dr. Joseph Miner. "Air quality is a significant concern for the UDOH, as we know that poor air quality can irritate the eyes, nose and throat and aggravate heart and lung conditions. But people are unlikely to experience symptoms from even the highest measured levels of these chemicals."

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The toxics study also found benzene, another listed carcinogen emitted mostly by automobiles, decreased nearly 70 percent between 2002 and 2016 in West Valley City.

“Protecting public health by regulating the emissions of air pollutants is one of the major objectives for DEQ,” said Bryce Bird, director of the Division of Air Quality. “We initiated the 2015 study because we wanted to expand our research. This brings us closer to our next step of finding solutions to mitigate the impacts.”

DEQ has submitted a grant application to the EPA in anticipation of receiving funding this fall, in time to conduct further tests this winter to better determine the sources. The new study would intensely sample over a two week period during winter and summer at three different sites in Bountiful where the highest concentrations of formaldehyde were observed. The report is on the DEQ’s web site at: http://deq.utah.gov/Pollutants/H/haps/hazardous-air-pollutants-study-2015.htm

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About DEQ

Established in 1991, the Utah Department of Environmental Quality’s (DEQ) mission is to safeguard public health and quality of life by protecting and enhancing the environment. DEQ implements state and federal environmental laws and works with individuals, community groups and businesses to protect the quality of Utah’s air, land and water. For more information, visit www.deq.utah.gov, follow DEQ on Facebook (utahdeq) and Twitter (UtahDEQ), or call 1-800-458-0145.