

Eco-Investigators Say Fracking Air Pollution is Poisoning Families in Texas

By [Mike Ludwig, Truthout](#) | Report Monday, 23 September 2013

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Cameron Cerny moved with his mother and father to Karnes County in southern Texas 10 years ago. The 15-year-old boy used to take long bike rides through the country with his mother, Myra, but they don't take rides together much anymore. Karnes County is in the heart of the oil-rich Eagle Ford Shale formation, which has become a relatively new hotspot for intensive oil drilling and [hydraulic fracturing](#), or "fracking." Since 2010, 18 oil wells were drilled or fracked within a mile from the Cernys' home, and a total of 37 existing wells, along with processing facilities and a wastewater injection well, operate within two miles of their home.

"[There's] loud trucks all day, there's smells that just smell horrible," Cerny told environmental investigators in July. "Nose bleeds all the time because of [this] stuff, in the middle of the night."

As oil production increased in their area, the Cernys and other residents began smelling odors described as "bad, terrible, chemical" and "rotten egg." They soon associated health problems such as headaches, nausea, rashes, burning eyes and nosebleeds with the bad odors.

In 2012, the Cernys and other residents filed a total of 30 air quality complaints with the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality (TCEQ), but, after the agency failed to provide them with an adequate response, the Cernys reached out to the environmental advocacy group Earthworks. The group's team of investigators, who had already [investigated](#) the health impacts of fracking in Pennsylvania, made some startling discoveries.

Officials Evacuate Fracking Facilities

Records requests filed by the investigators revealed that TCEQ field workers had visited facilities emitting pollution near the Cernys' home in 2012 on several occasions, and twice the officials [evacuated themselves](#) due to high levels of pollution in the air, according to a report released by Earthworks.

On March 1, 2012, TCEQ officials visited the Yosko Number 1 production facility, operated by the Marathon Company about a mile from the Cerny home. The officials evacuated after detecting volatile organic compounds (VOCs), a pollutant commonly released by oil and gas operations, at dangerously high levels.

"The recon team evacuated the area quickly to prevent exposure . . . this facility is less than a mile from the Complainant's residence," the TCEQ workers wrote in their field report.

In a statement to Truthout, TCEQ spokeswoman Lisa Wheeler said that Marathon employees were present when TCEQ investigators took the high VOC reading near the source of a leaking valve, and a repair team was radioed to the site.

It's not uncommon for regulatory officials to evacuate during investigations to protect their own safety, and they absolutely should, according to the Earthworks report. The regulators did email Marathon after the March 1 evacuation to notify the company that the Yosko facility should be shut down or repaired because a valve was leaking pollution, but Earthworks points out that TCEQ did not fine or issue a violation to the company for the leak.

Wheeler told Truthout that Marathon reported to TCEQ on March 5 that a valve leaking VOCs at the

Yosko facility was repaired on March 1, the day of the evacuation during the TCEQ investigation.

A similar scenario played out on June 15, 2012, at another Marathon facility near the Cernys' home called Sugerhorn, when TCEQ officials were unable to take air pollution samples after their handheld safety devices detected dangerous amounts of VOCs in the air, according to the Earthworks report.

After receiving complaints of "nose bleeds," "rashes" and "eye irritants" from the Cernys later that summer, TCEQ officials visited the Sugerhorn site on August 15 and used special cameras to identify pollution emissions from venting petroleum tanks. On September 5, TCEQ inspectors informed Marathon that a flare, which burns off gases collected during the oil production process, was not burning.

In December 2012, Marathon alerted TCEQ that, during 12-hour periods on August 15 and September 5, the petroleum tanks and failed flare let loose carcinogenic chemical gases such as benzene, along with levels of VOCs and hydrogen sulfide, that exceeded permitted levels by up to 500 times.

Marathon was supposed to report such problems within 24 hours, but failed to do so for four months. TCEQ issued violations for late reporting and unauthorized discharge, but the agency did not collect any fines or issue penalties, Earthworks claims. Instead, Marathon simply informed TCEQ that its employees were given special trainings.

Failure to Notify Residents of Fracking Pollution

Earthworks criticizes TCEQ for going soft on Marathon, but the investigators were far more alarmed to find that TCEQ officials never notified the Cernys or other residents about the pollution events, despite their complaints. There was also no apparent attempt to take further tests to determine if the residents were in danger.

"From the regulators in Texas to the United States' EPA, government agencies are running away from their own data showing that fracking pollution is harming communities," said Jennifer Krill, executive director of Earthworks.

Wheeler said that, overall, TCEQ monitoring data indicates that drilling and fracking in the Eagle Ford Shale "does not significantly impact air quality or human health." She did not, however, respond to questions from Truthout on why the agency did not tell residents including the Cernys that significant amounts of pollution had been released in their neighborhood during accidents such as those at Sugarhorn. She also did not explain why Marathon got away with polluting the air without facing fines or penalties.

Environmental investigators took their own videos of pollution streaming out from oil and gas facilities in the area, and their own tests found pollutants such as benzene in the air at the Cernys' home and a nearby facility that are consistent with the symptoms reported by the family and their neighbors. While none of the samples exceeded TCEQ's short-term "air monitoring comparison values," the amount of benzene at a nearby facility was 20 times that long-term limit set by the agency.

Wheeler said that TCEQ has a "vigorous, effective enforcement operation" at the Eagle Ford Shale production area. Earthworks, she pointed out, is the same group that raised alarms about fracking air pollution at the Barnett Shale, another oil formation in Texas. When a state-of-the-art, automated air monitoring system was installed at Barnett, it indicated that air pollutants posed no threat to human health.

In its report, Earthworks counters that such a system has yet to be installed at Eagle Ford.

Then there's Cameron Cerny, the 15-year-old boy living amid it all. He doesn't seem to trust the regulators or the industry anymore.

"It's all a lie. It's just, they're just worried about money, they are not worried about the environment or health, they're just worried about money," Cerny said in a video interview. "There's just always smoke out here, all this stuff, and I know it's poisoning the air. And they act like nothing is going on."