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Conservation Activists File Petition With EPA Over Plastic Plant Pollution Standards

SAN FRANCISCO (CBS SF) — Members of several community and environmental organizations announced Tuesday they're calling on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to adopt stricter air pollution standards for industrial plants that create plastic.

As part of the action, about a dozen people rallied outside the EPA's San Francisco office, located at 75 Hawthorne St., demanding that the agency update its decades-old air pollution monitoring and control standards, and that all new petrochemical plants be fully powered with renewable energy.

"Some of these (requirements) haven't been updated for decades and they're quite lax," Lauren Packard, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity, said.

"For instance, we're calling for fence line monitoring, for continuous emissions monitoring and monitoring using optical gas imaging to protect communities living near these facilities and bearing the brunt of these toxic emissions."

Packard said the updates are desperately needed, as plastic production soars thanks to a recent oversupply of gas obtained from fracking.

"An oversupply of cheap fracked gas is instigating a massive build out of petrochemical facilities. In advance of this build out, we need to make sure the EPA is protecting communities and the planet," she said.

"Plastic production is a part of the climate crisis. Every step of the way, from fracking to the feedstock, from transporting to processing to manufacturing plastic to the ultimate disposal in landfills, in incinerators, or our oceans is exacerbating our climate crisis and putting us all at risk," she said.

Currently, most petrochemical plants where plastics are made are located near the Gulf Coast and the Appalachian Mountains. The facilities are allowed to emit hundreds of tons of toxins and carcinogenic pollutants, which can lead to cancer and respiratory problems and other illnesses, according to the advocates.

“Plastic pollutes at every stage of its life cycle,” said Stiv Wilson, who has produced a film, “The Story of Plastic,” which covers how plastics are made and disposed of, and highlights the problems with plastic.

“The climate issue and the plastics issue are literally the same issues and plastic companies are fossil fuel companies,” he said. “We’re showing the world the new narrative on what we have to think about with regards to plastic pollution, so that we can base policy and we can base activism on the entire lifecycle of plastic, not just once it gets to the ocean.”

Following the action, the advocates filed a legal petition with the EPA, calling for the new updates to its standards under the Clean Air Act.

Once the EPA reviews the petition, it could consider the changes. If no action is taken, the advocates said a lawsuit could come later down the road.