

"Fugitive dust" from Norfolk coal cars stirs health fears

By Aaron Applegate
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NORFOLK

Cathy Henry wondered about the black stuff. It coated the hands and feet of her 19-month-old twin girls when they played on the balcony of her West Ghent duplex.

Environmental activists going door to door recently told her what it was: coal dust.

Henry, 30, and her Navy pilot husband, who moved to Norfolk in October, were outraged.

"You try to raise your kids right - buy the organic stuff, try to keep them healthy - and then there's this," she said.

Residents and environmentalists say the coal dust blows in from the Lamberts Point coal terminal on the Elizabeth River and off uncovered Norfolk Southern rail cars that bring coal there from the mountains of Kentucky, Virginia and West Virginia.

The railroad company's terminal, known as Pier 6, is the largest coal exporting facility in the Northern Hemisphere. Last year, 21.8 million tons of coal shuttled by about 200,000 rail cars arrived at the terminal to be loaded onto ships bound for Asia, Europe and South America.

A few blocks away, in the Lamberts Point neighborhood, homeowner James Freeman, 62, opened a dining room window on a recent afternoon and pointed to a gritty, black substance coating the sill.

"If I had known about this, I wouldn't have purchased this house," said Freeman, who bought his house in 2010. "We're stuck in a place we don't want to be."

He said the dust worsens the breathing problems of his 7-year-old grandson, who lives with him.

A recent forum on coal dust at Old Dominion University sponsored by the Sierra Club and the Chesapeake Climate Action Network drew about 100 people. Residents and environmentalists plan to ask Norfolk Southern officials to meet with them to talk about what could be done to limit the dust.

A Norfolk Southern spokesman said he didn't know whether the company would agree to a meeting.

"It's not just an aesthetic problem," said Glen Besa, director of the Virginia Sierra Club. "It's a health problem."

The finer particulates of coal dust can be inhaled and penetrate deep into the lungs, said Janice Nolen, vice president of national policy for the American Lung Association.

Nolen said she doesn't know how much coal dust Norfolk residents might be breathing in but said research shows too much can lead to premature death, heart attacks, strokes, asthma attacks, lung cancer, low birth rate and premature birth.

She said covering the coal cars would help cut down on escaped coal dust, known as "fugitive dust."

Longtime Norfolk residents know concerns about coal dust go way back.

Coal has been shipped from Lamberts Point since the first pier was completed in 1885. A series of new piers followed; the latest, Pier 6, has been operating since 1962.

In the 1990s, state lawmakers, responding to complaints from residents about coal dust wafting off rail cars, considered a law requiring the company to cover cars to contain fugitive dust. Instead, Norfolk Southern officials persuaded the General Assembly to conduct a study to look for another solution, arguing the cost of covering cars would cripple business.

Norfolk Southern hired a consultant who recommended spraying freshly loaded railcars with a chemical compound that forms a crust over coal to cut down the amount of dust blowing off trains. The General Assembly's 1997 study, "Ways to Reduce Emissions from Coal-Carrying Railroad Cars," concluded spraying the cars had reduced coal dust. The issue died down.

"It's better than it used to be," said Beverly Mann, 75, a Norfolk resident who traveled to Richmond at least half a dozen times in the 1990s to plead with lawmakers to do something about coal dust. "I'm not saying it's gone. It's still here."

Mann said it was always awkward to speak out against Norfolk Southern because the company is respected in the community for its philanthropy.

"There are not a lot of people who want to speak out against a Fortune 500 company that does so many things for this city," she said.

Last year, Norfolk Southern's coal revenue, its largest commodity group, was about \$2.5 billion. The company employs about 500 workers at the Lamberts Point terminal.

West Ghent homeowner Joe Pereira has lived near the tracks for 19 years. He said he's noticed some coal dust in the area over the years, but it doesn't bother him much.

"It is what it is," he said. "If you don't like it, move."

The state Department of Environmental Quality inspects the Lamberts Point coal terminal at least once every five years for air pollution, said John Brandt, DEQ's regional air compliance and monitoring manager.

The most recent inspection, in 2011, showed no violations.

During the previous inspection in 2007, a DEQ inspector cited Norfolk Southern for improperly cleaning up coal that spilled from conveyor belts before reaching ships. Workers used a front-end loader to pick up the coal and load it into a dump truck.

"A significantly sized plume of coal dust was observed each time the crew dumped the front end loader," the inspector wrote.

Norfolk Southern responded that in the future, workers would make sure water was available to wet coal before it's scooped and dumped.

The terminal operates under a 1992 permit from the state Department of Air Pollution Control Quality, now the DEQ.

Freeman, the Lamberts Point homeowner, said last year a large cloud of coal dust darkened the sky and blew down his street.

"It looked like somebody had dumped dirt out of a vacuum cleaner and turned on a fan," he said.

Norfolk Southern spokesman Robin Chapman said he had heard anecdotally about the incident but had no information about what happened.

He said the company is complying with state air pollution requirements.

"We are very conscious of the impact on the local environment, and we try very hard to mitigate it to the extent that's possible," he said.

Chapman said the company believes the chemical compound sprayed on the cars is working and that covering the cars is unnecessary and possibly too expensive.

In 1991, company officials told a General Assembly committee that car covers would cost \$700 each and would increase the cost of unloading each car by \$200. Chapman said he wasn't aware of a recent calculation of what railcar covers would cost today.

"We believe that it's sufficient to control the dust below levels that would pose any hazard," he said of the spraying.

"We can't say that 100 percent of the dust is captured. Nothing is absolute."

Henry, the West Ghent resident, said her family has decided to move as soon as their one-year lease is up.

"I feel like people should be notified or warned about this neighborhood," she said.

Freeman said he wants to move and will talk it over with his wife after she retires in June. He said he wants to get away from the coal dust:

"They are really messing up the neighborhood with all this stuff."

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