

Press Release from the Southern Environmental Law Center

For Immediate Release: June 3, 2019

Contact: Heather Hillaker, Attorney, SELC, (919) 967-1450, hhillaker@selcnc.org

Challenge from Clean Air Groups Forces NC Wood Pellet Factory to Install Pollution Controls

Enviva Biomass Plant Under Construction in Richmond County Agrees to Reduce Smog-Forming Pollutant by 95 Percent

Charlotte, North Carolina — The world's largest manufacturer of wood pellet fuel for power plants, Enviva, agreed to install air pollution-reducing equipment at a biomass plant under construction in Richmond County, North Carolina, in a [settlement](#) finalized today after three conservation groups challenged its state permit.

At a unit of its wood pellet plant being built in the town of Hamlet, east of Charlotte, Enviva will reduce harmful volatile organic compounds (or VOC) air pollution from its smokestacks by at least 95 percent, according to an agreement the company signed with Clean Air Carolina, which is represented by the Environmental Integrity Project and the Southern Environmental Law Center. The N.C. Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) also signed onto the agreement.

"This settlement agreement is a huge victory for the people of North Carolina, because it will mean fewer asthma attacks and health risks for families living downwind," said Patrick Anderson, attorney for the Environmental Integrity Project (EIP). "The biomass industry is nothing like the clean, sustainable answer to climate change it paints itself to be. In fact, it is a major source of air pollution."

"Residents of Richmond County already face some of the worst health outcomes in our state," said June Blotnick, Executive Director of Clean Air Carolina. "The new air pollution controls required by this settlement will decrease hazardous air pollutants and VOC emissions, reducing two additional threats to the communities' health."

"The residents of Hamlet and Richmond County deserve protection from the unnecessary air pollution that would've come with Enviva's facility if not for this agreement," said Heather Hillaker, attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center. "Now Richmond County families can breathe easier, but, as the wood pellet industry plans to expand operations throughout the state, the threat remains for many North Carolinians to the air we breathe and wetlands that buffer us from storms and floods."

On behalf of Clean Air Carolina, EIP and SELC on February 13 challenged the Enviva Hamlet air pollution permit in the North Carolina Office of Administrative Hearings. The case alleges that DEQ failed to scrutinize Enviva's air pollution estimates and improperly classified the facility as a "minor" air pollution source when it was actually a major source.

Enviva entered the settlement agreement with the three environmental organizations to avoid further litigation over the Richmond County plant's construction permit.

Under the terms of the agreement, Enviva will install one of several pollution control technologies on a wood pellet production unit known as a "dry hammermill" at the Hamlet plant. Although the exact control technology will be selected by Enviva in the coming months, each of the available options will achieve at least 95 percent reduction in volatile organic compound (VOCs) pollution and hazardous air pollutants like methanol, acrolein, and formaldehyde.

VOCs are a potent precursor to ground level ozone and smog, and can cause breathing problems for the elderly, young children, and people with lung conditions such as asthma. The new controls will reduce the facility's VOC emissions by at least 140 tons per year, and potentially by as much as 500 tons per year, according to the terms of the agreement.

The Enviva plant is part of a new and growing industry expanding across North Carolina and the South, with 21 plants — 15 of them built in the last decade — that clear cut forests and compact wood into pellets to ship overseas to Europe to burn in power plants. The demand is driven by a European climate change policy that incorrectly treats wood biomass pollution as harmless or "carbon neutral."

Numerous studies, including a study commissioned by the Southern Environmental Law Center, debunk this myth and show the industry actually puts as much or more carbon pollution into the air than the fuels it replaces. A 2018 study by the Environmental Integrity Project found that the 21 U.S. wood pellet mills exporting to Europe emit a total of 3.1 million tons of greenhouse gases annually, along with 2,500 tons of particulate matter (soot), 3,200 tons of nitrogen oxides, 2,100 tons of carbon monoxide, and 7,000 tons of volatile organic compounds.

###

Clean Air Carolina is a statewide nonprofit organization whose mission is to ensure cleaner air quality for all North Carolinians through education and advocacy and by working with its partners to reduce sources of pollution. www.cleanaircarolina.org

The Environmental Integrity Project is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization based in Washington, D.C., and Austin, Texas, that protects public health and the environment by investigating polluters, holding them accountable under the law, and strengthening public policy.
www.environmentalintegrity.org

For more than 30 years, the Southern Environmental Law Center has used the power of the law to champion the environment of the Southeast. With over 70 attorneys and nine offices across the region, SELC is widely recognized as the Southeast's foremost environmental organization and regional leader. SELC works on a full range of environmental issues to protect our natural resources and the health and well-being of all the people in our region.
www.SouthernEnvironment.org

Partner Groups

Tom Pelton
Environmental Integrity Project
(202) 888-2703
tpelton@environmentalintegrity.org

June Blotnick
Clean Air Carolina
(704) 877-6405
june@cleanaircarolina.org