



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: April 11, 2023

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*****BREAKING NEWS*****

The U.S. EPA Announces New Rules to Tighten Harmful Ethylene Oxide Emissions from Commercial Sterilizer Plants to Protect Affected Communities from High Cancer Risks

After a year of fierce activism and demands, RGISC and Clean Air Laredo Coalition members celebrate this first step but call for greater protections

Midwest Sterilization in Laredo still ranks among the most polluting facilities in the nation



LAREDO, TX - In a major development regarding the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) oversight of cancer-causing emissions from commercial sterilizer plants like Midwest Sterilization Corp. in Laredo, the federal agency announced two proposed rules on Tuesday morning.

The [long-awaited announcement](#) comes nearly six months after the Rio Grande International Study Center (RGISC) filed a lawsuit in federal

district court through Earthjustice with four other plaintiffs against the EPA over its failure to update emissions standards from medical sterilizer facilities in nearly two decades, missing two critical deadlines: first in 2014 and again in 2022.

“These proposed rules are the first step to addressing elevated and unnecessary cancer risks that Laredo and other impacted communities face from facilities like Midwest Sterilization,” said **Sheila Serna, RGISC Climate Science & Policy Director, who is overseeing a groundbreaking fence-line air monitoring project around Midwest with local government partners through the Clean Air Laredo Coalition.**

“However, we have more work ahead of us to make sure that the final rules are as protective as possible.”

The newly proposed rules require that 86 of 96 commercial sterilizers across the country reduce the maximum individual cancer risk for nearby residents to 100-in-1 million (1 in 10,000) or lower. Currently, Laredo ranks among the top 23 most vulnerable communities nationally due to the significantly high volume of emissions from Midwest. Children at many Laredo campuses, public and private, are exposed to some of the worst air toxicity in the country due to these harmful ethylene oxide emissions.

“Today, residents of Laredo are a step closer to breathing cleaner air,” said **Laredo City Council member Vanessa Perez**, who co-founded the Clean Air Laredo Coalition in 2021. “It’s the EPA’s mission to ensure our air is safe to breathe. We are relying on the EPA’s ruling to move the country in the right direction for environmental protection and justice.”

Also on Tuesday, the EPA released shocking results of a new cancer risk assessment of employees at industrial sterilizer facilities across the country that shows an unprecedented 1-in-10 risk for developing cancer due to the negligent use of ethylene oxide. The agency is revamping its standards regarding personal protective equipment (PPE) for workers at these facilities.

“This is heartbreaking. We need the EPA to start the phase-out of this extremely dangerous chemical to protect the lives of workers that, for the most part, are unaware of what they are being exposed to,” said **Tricia Cortez, RGISC executive director**. “Other internationally recognized sterilization methods exist that don’t endanger so many lives.”

Additionally, the newly proposed rules require that sterilizers:

- Conduct continuous air pollution monitoring within their facilities;
- Report their internal air monitoring data to the EPA twice a year;
- Install pollution controls within an expedited 18 month timeframe after EPA issues the final rule.

While Tuesday’s announcement is a major first step forward, Clean Air Laredo members have pointed out that the newly proposed rules fall short in two critical areas:

1. Require fence-line air monitoring around industrial facilities to determine the actual level of EtO emissions that are being released into the surrounding air; and
2. Regulate fugitive emissions from warehouses where sterilizer facilities store and off-gas their sterilized products before being sent to market.

The public will have an opportunity to attend a national Webinar on May 1, and submit comments to the EPA shortly thereafter.

“This will be the moment for people in our community who care deeply about protecting our children and families to demand that the EPA include fence-line air monitoring and warehouse emissions into the final rule,” **Serna said**. “That is absolutely necessary to safeguard our health and safety.”

About Ethylene Oxide (EtO)

EtO is one of the most toxic air pollutants that the EPA regulates. It is a mutagenic, colorless, typically odorless, and flammable gas used to make products like antifreeze and plastics and sterilize some spices. Industrial facilities like Midwest Sterilization use ethylene oxide for medical equipment. EtO is a Class 1 human carcinogen that is particularly harmful when inhaled. In 2016, the EPA updated its toxicity value and announced that the chemical is [60 times more toxic than previously estimated](#). Despite knowing that emissions from commercial sterilizer facilities pose an elevated cancer risk in Laredo and other communities, EPA had not reviewed its rules for sterilizers since 2006.

Website: www.cleanairlaredo.org | [Facebook](#) | [Instagram](#) | [Twitter](#)

Founded in 1994, RGISC is a 501c3 research and advocacy environmental nonprofit based in Laredo, dedicated to protecting and preserving our only source of drinking water, the Rio Grande, and local environment for present lives and future generations.