

Green Steel Committee hopes to clean up Region steelmaking

Joseph S. Pete Mar 22, 2025 0

Three of Northwest Indiana's steel mills rank among the worst sources of air pollution and greenhouse gases in the country and a group of local activists hopes to change that.

Gary Advocates for Responsible Development's Green Steel Committee met at 18th Street Brewery in Gary's Miller Beach neighborhood Thursday to discuss ways to reduce pollution and carbon emissions from local mills. They hope to persuade steelmakers to invest in technologies like direct-reduced iron that could reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

GARD is partnering with other organizations and doing research so it can help minimize pollution at its source, President Doreen Carey said. The group of local environmental activists for instance recently met with local health professionals, including Gary Health Department Commissioner Dr. Janet Seabrook to discuss the impact air pollution from the Gary Works steel mill has on residents.

The group also has been seeking grant funding to promote green steel. It's been developing more informational materials to explain the pollution issues to the public. It for instance is concerned about a proposal to burn plastic waste in Gary Works' four blast furnaces as a replacement for coke, a purified form of coal scientists say contributes to climate change.

"Local environmental activists in Erie, Pennsylvania are opposing construction of the plant," Carey said. "It has not been constructed yet. It had a conditional loan from the Department of Energy, which may or may not go through at this point due to the whole limitations that are being put on things that are supposedly green by the administration at the federal level. GARD is opposing sending plastic waste to Gary to burn in the blast furnaces."

The group also raised concerns about Indiana Harbor Works' latest coke plant permit.

"Emissions from coke ovens are among the worst," Conversation Law Center attorney Mike Zoeller said. "Coke oven gases were on the first list the EPA created. This is really bad stuff. There are 268 coke ovens on Indiana Harbor, the old Inland facility right out near the point. They have a permit to pollute and it was up earlier this year. It was not a change, so it was business as usual."

The contractor Indiana Harbor Coke supplies coke to the blast furnaces at Indiana Harbor Works. The permit came up for administrative review with the Indiana Department of Environmental Management earlier this year.

GARD requested a public hearing, but the state never scheduled a meeting.

"Almost all of their product is being used by Cleveland-Cliffs. The entire peninsula of Indiana Harbor is a facility that has to be covered by an air permit for permitting purposes. But there's a number of contractors working for them," Zoeller said.

The environmental activist Jack Weinberg said Gary is a highly polluted city with air pollution that causes respiratory diseases, asthma, cancers, cardiovascular diseases and deaths. The air quality is a deterrent to redevelopment in the economically troubled city, he said.

"The biggest source of air pollution is the three local steel mills in Northwest Indiana: Gary Works, Indiana Harbor Works and Burns Harbor Works, which are both within five miles of Gary City limits," he said. The mills together produce nearly half the iron made in the United States, with Gary Works alone accounting for 20%, Weinberg said. They're also among the biggest sources of greenhouse gas emissions, producing 1.8 tons to 2 tons of carbon dioxide for every 1 ton of steel made. Northwest Indiana's steel mills produced 28 million metric tons of carbon dioxide in 2020.

That's more than eight states in the United States.

"That's how polluting they are," he said. "They are a major global source of greenhouse gases. They are of global significance. They are not just of

national significance. They are among the world's largest sources of greenhouse gases."

The EPA found that the Region's three major integrated steel mills are the No. 2, No. 6 and No. 7 largest sources of fine particulate air pollution in the United States, Weinberg said.

"If you look at the other sources in the top 10, those are the only three in an urban area," he said. "The rest are more remote. Blast furnaces are bad for the health of Gary residents and bad for the environment."