Grain dust draws complaints

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CONVENT — Clouds of grain dust from grain transfer facilities in the Mississippi River are blanketing homes here and are being blamed for some residents' health problems.

Homeowners and workers in this St. James Parish community are complaining of sinus attacks, allergic reactions and upper respiratory problems because of the thick yellow haze that rises from the mid-stream grain operations.

Residents and some officials have asked the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality to investigate the problems. But one grain operator is already working to cut down the amount of grain dust leaving its facility.

"We're trying to clean up our act," said Fred Robinson, assistant manager of the Delta Bulk Terminal at Convent. "We do have a problem, depending on the wind direction. We're trying to alleviate the situation as best we can," Robinson said.

The Delta Bulk facility is one of three in St. James that is being blamed for deluging nearby communities with grain dust. The others are the Cargill, Inc. facility at Convent and the ITO Corp. facility at nearby Paulina.

Spokesmen for ITO and Cargill were unavailable for comment Monday.

Grain and grain products are transferred in bulk from barges to ocean-going vessels anchored in the river. Grain dust billows from the floating transfer facilities and the ships' cargo holds and is carried by the wind into neighboring towns.

"It's a mess," said Mrs. Lawrence Lambert, who lives near the Cargill and Delta Bulk operations on the River Road in Convent.

Grain dust constantly is being blown into her home through windows and doors, forcing her to clean on a daily basis.

"All this is a white dust. You can feel the film... As far as the floors, I have to wipe something across it every day. I'm forever passing a damp mop over it," Lambert said.

It's difficult to breathe with the dust in the air, and it has caused some physical discomfort for her and her neighbors, she said.

"When you breathe that, it gets you nauseated," she said. "It looks like it wants to suffocate you."

Joe Canatella of Convent, a part-time sheriff's deputy, said an investigator from DEQ's Air Quality Division tested a white powder that he scraped from the surface of his car.

"He reported back that it was 50 percent soybean dust," Canatella said.

"It gave me a big sinus attack. I've lived here all my life and I've never had that before," he said.

A videotape of the Cargill facility taken by Canatella on March 6 shows clouds of dust escaping from the grain transfer operation into the atmosphere and being carried downriver.

"We've been having a problem. It's getting worse all the time," he said.

Wanda Carter of Paulina said grain dust from the ITO facility is affecting the entire community.

"Whenever the wind is blowing we get it. We can't even sit outside," she said.

Chief Sheriff's Deputy Steve Reed of Convent said the dust made him and members of his family sick.

"It aggravates your sinuses and gets them inflamed," he said.

A lot of the escaping dust can be traced to operator error, according to Robinson. He said Delta Bulk is doing all it can to contain the grain dust.

"We're not going to ignore them. We want to get along with everyone," the Delta Bulk official said.

Delta Bulk has instructed its operators not to overfill grain transfer buckets and to make sure that dust covers are in place, Robinson said.

"The cargo itself is 20 percent to 30 percent dust," he said. Delta Bulk has operated in Convent for six years but only recently began receiving complaints, Robinson said.