

Community Outreach: Seeking Volunteer Scientists

A Grassroots Partnership to Interpret Local Air Quality Data

Citizens for Safe Water and Air - Port Townsend

PORT TOWNSEND, WA

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1. The Project and Its Origins

A community-led project seeking to better understand sulfur emissions from Port Townsend Paper Company (PTPC) is recruiting volunteer atmospheric scientists and air quality experts to support a 12 to 15 month assessment [1]. The project is being developed in partnership with the American Geophysical Union's Thriving Earth Exchange (TEE) and aims to help the community interpret existing federal air quality data and evaluate whether additional sulfur monitoring is warranted [1].

Derek Firenze, a Port Townsend resident and one of two community leads on the project, came across the Thriving Earth Exchange (TEE) while writing about paper mill emission findings for a local newspaper last year [1]. After making public comments at Port Townsend City Council and Climate Action Committee (CAC) meetings, Firenze teamed up with Jaime Duyck, a Port Townsend resident and Climate Action Committee (CAC) member [1]. The Thriving Earth Exchange (TEE) requires at least two community leads before it becomes involved, Firenze said [1].

Thriving Earth Exchange (TEE) Community Science Fellow Aara'L Yarber is serving as the project manager [1]. Firenze said Yarber is handling scientist outreach, coordination, and vetting, helping to formalize and legitimize what began as a grassroots effort [1]. "She is actually doing the majority of the legwork at this point," Firenze said. "Having the Thriving Earth Exchange and having Aara'L as our project manager is really building the legitimacy of this issue." [1]

2. What the Volunteer Scientists Would Do

The group is seeking one or two scientists with experience in atmospheric science, sulfur emissions, industrial air pollution, plume modeling, air quality regulation, or community monitoring [1]. Those interested can find an application link and a project timeline at tinyurl.com/4v4sts7j [1]. "Experience communicating technical information to non-technical audiences and interest in community-engaged or environmental justice-oriented work are strongly valued," the project's news release states [1].

Firenze said the project has two main goals: advising on possible sulfur monitoring expansion and interpreting existing federal data to inform policy recommendations [1]. One potential role would involve advising on community-based air monitoring, including wintertime sampling and plume tracking [1]. A second goal would focus on analyzing existing data and helping craft a proposal to the state for possible changes to monitoring practices [1]. Firenze acknowledged the likelihood that those two skill sets may not be found in a single volunteer. "If we can find somebody for both, one person who could

do all of that, that would be amazing," Firenze said. "Our assumption is we're not going to find that unicorn." [1]

Firenze said the volunteer's primary task would be helping residents understand and apply findings from a 2018 air study conducted by the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) [1]. The role may or may not involve new air monitoring, depending on what the selected scientist recommends. "It really depends on what the science expert thinks," Firenze said [1].

3. The 2018 Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry Air Study Findings

The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) study, released in 2024 based on 2018 sampling, detected 14 sulfur compounds in the local airshed [1]. Only four are regulated by the state Department of Ecology [1]. The report's primary health finding was that, while individual sulfur compounds were generally measured at levels unlikely to cause harm, simultaneous spikes in multiple sulfur compounds could create occasional acute respiratory effects [1].

The study did not find evidence of chronic respiratory harm at the population level, and asthma hospitalization rates in Port Townsend were not statistically higher than Jefferson County or state averages [1]. The report characterized those acute exposures as infrequent during the sampling period, but Firenze said the frequency question remains a point of community concern [1].

Last summer, authors of the study presented their findings during two public meetings at Port Townsend's Pope Marine Building [1]. Representatives from the mill also attended and answered questions from residents [1]. Firenze said winter monitoring was specifically discussed during those presentations. "They admitted that everyone seems to say that it's worse in the winter," Firenze said [1]. About 2,463 residents lived within 1 mile of the mill as of 2020, according to the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) report [1].

4. Housing Density and Environmental Justice Context

The project comes as the city advances the Evans Vista workforce housing development and as Olympic Community Action Programs operates the Caswell Brown emergency shelter nearby, both of which increase residential density in proximity to the mill [1]. "Low-income folks who would be living at Caswell Brown, who would be living at Evans Vista, have higher rates of asthma, heart disease and other health risks," Firenze said [1].

Firenze referenced Washington's Healthy Environment for All (HEAL) Act, which directs state agencies to consider cumulative environmental health disparities in decision-making [1]. The law acknowledges that low-income communities face disproportionate environmental health burdens [1].

5. How Residents Can Report Odors

The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) report advised that individuals sensitive to environmental odors reduce exposure during strong odor events by limiting outdoor activity or temporarily leaving the area [1]. It also recommended continued odor complaint monitoring and additional efforts to reduce emissions [1].

Community members may report odors to the state Department of Ecology's environmental engineer, Mady Lyon, via email at mady.lyon@ecy.wa.gov or by phone at 360-628-3250 [1]. Reports should include the date, time, location, odor description, and any health impacts experienced [1].

Sources and Citations

All factual claims in this document are drawn from the following sources, verified during research for this document.

1. Elijah Sussman, Peninsula Daily News: "Port Townsend group seeking volunteer scientists," published 1:30 AM, Tuesday, February 24, 2026. Available at: peninsuladailynews.com/2026/02/24/port-townsend-group-seeking-volunteer-scientists/ (archived July 19, 2026, full text captured via direct web fetch). Reporter Elijah Sussman can be reached by email at elijah.sussman@peninsuladailynews.com.