Regional Administrator Cathy Stepp  
U.S. Environmental Protection Agency  
Region 5  
77 W Jackson Blvd.  
Chicago, IL 60604-3590

Dear Regional Administrator Stepp:

I write to express frustration at the slow pace of the Environmental Protection Agency’s (EPA’s) response to public concern about ethylene oxide emissions from the Sterigenics facility in Willowbrook, IL and to request that the Agency accelerate its plans to conduct air quality monitoring in the surrounding communities.

In a September 21, 2018 letter to Acting Administrator Wheeler, I requested that EPA move swiftly to conduct ambient air monitoring around the Sterigenics facility. In a response dated September 27, 2018, Assistant Administrator for Air and Radiation Wehrum wrote that EPA intends to conduct ambient air monitoring in the near future. More than two weeks later, my office has learned that EPA has not yet set a date to conduct ambient air monitoring. I learned further that EPA does not plan to conduct such monitoring until after it receives the full results of an emissions test conducted at Sterigenics on September 20-21 and updates its air toxics model calculations using the new data, a process that could take several more weeks.

Given the nature of the potential health consequences of ethylene oxide exposure and the level of public concern, the delay in ambient air monitoring around Sterigenics and the lack of a clear timeline is unacceptable. Both the villages of Willowbrook and Burr Ridge, responding to their residents’ reasonable demands for timely information, have made plans to conduct their own ambient air monitoring.

I understand that measuring ethylene oxide in ambient air is challenging, especially at the low concentrations known to trigger increased human health risk, and that in an effort to generate the best exposure estimates, EPA plans to base its selection of air monitoring locations on modeling that incorporates the latest Sterigenics data. However, in light of the urgent need for updated monitoring data, EPA should move forward with ambient monitoring as soon as possible. It is possible to select locations based on existing modeling data and estimates of how pollutant distribution will change based on the preliminary data Sterigenics has already released. Beginning monitoring now with near-complete modeling is preferable to waiting possibly several more weeks for complete modeling.

In addition to moving forward expeditiously with your own air monitoring, I request that you make your staff and scientists available to assist the villages of Willowbrook and Burr Ridge,
and any other interested local government, in planning and conducting their own air quality studies. The Village of Willowbrook has already made such a request in a letter to EPA Office of Air Quality Associate Director of Policy Koerber, dated October 11, 2018. Assisting and coordinating with local governments on monitoring efforts is likely to improve the usefulness of the data collected by all parties and to provide a better estimate of the public health threat.

In your reply to this letter, I request that you please include the date that EPA plans to begin collecting ambient air samples for ethylene oxide monitoring around the Sterigenics facility, as well as details of your efforts to assist and coordinate with local governments. Please do not hesitate to contact me or Joel Creswell in my Washington, DC office at 202-225-5701 or joel.creswell@mail.house.gov with questions or to discuss this matter further.

Sincerely,

Daniel W. Lipinski
Member of Congress

Cc: Alec Messina, Director, Illinois Environmental Protection Agency
    Mark Johnson, Director, Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, Region 5
    Frank Trilla, Mayor, Village of Willowbrook, Illinois
    Mickey Straub, Mayor, Village of Burr Ridge, Illinois