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ENCOURAGING ETHANOL INDUSTRY TO CLEAN UP

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For years, ethanol has been heralded as a renewable fuel that will help the environment while also helping Midwest farmers. But now the U.S. EPA is asking ethanol production plants to take a second look at the emissions that come from making the corn-based fuel. The Great Lakes Radio Consortium's Jonathan Ahl reports:

About three years ago, residents that live near the Gopher State ethanol plant near Minneapolis complained of a foul odor. The EPA investigated, and found unexpectedly high levels of pollutants including carbon monoxide, methanol and formaldehyde. That led to a seventeen-month study of selected ethanol sites in the Great Lakes region that showed other plants were also spewing out the pollutants. Ron Miller is the president of Williams Bio-Energy, an ethanol producer. He says as an industry, ethanol producers want to make things right:

"If indeed some of the plants have to make some corrective investments, I believe those will be made. I don't think it is going to long-term harm the industry. And certainly, if we discover things that we didn't know, then we should make those changes."

That willingness on the part of ethanol manufacturers to comply with new emissions restrictions led the U.S. EPA to meet with ethanol producers, and ask them to make the corrections. But some groups are upset that the EPA is asking and not telling the manufacturers to clean up their act. Brian Urbaseski is a spokesperson with the American Lung Association Chicago chapter. He says the EPA needs to take a stronger stand with the ethanol industry:

"A voluntary situation can't last forever. These plants will eventually have to follow the rules under the Clean Air Act. It's the federal law. And the law is there for a reason, to protect public health."

The American Lung Association thinks the ethanol industry gets a lot of breaks because it's politically popular. They question if the current EPA action is another one of those sweetheart deals. The EPA disagrees. Tom Skinner is the director of the U.S. EPA's region that covers most of the Great Lakes states. He says because the ethanol industry seems willing to comply with the new guidelines, he wants to give them a chance to get there without lengthy court action and fines. Skinner says the initially voluntary program may speed things up:

"The goal is being more effective environmental protection. If we can get the same environmental protection within three months or six months that would normally take us two or three years, everybody finishes ahead of the game."

Skinner says he will not hesitate to enforce new standards with ethanol producers if they do not comply with the request. But Skinner says he doesn't think that will be necessary. Ron Miller, the ethanol plant manager at the Williams Bio-Energy plant says it's in the industry's best interest to take advantage of the voluntary program and make the changes as soon as possible. He says if nothing else, it makes sense from a marketing standpoint:

"We try to bill ourselves as a clean, environmental product. We are the only renewable

component in gasoline that you can drink. And so we are a very environmentally beneficial product, so we ought to be able to produce it in an environmentally sound manner."

Miller says the whole situation doesn't deserve the attention it has gotten and it isn't that important. He calls it a small bump in the road toward more ethanol use. But the idea of a voluntary emissions clean up may be off to a rough start. The industry and the government are just beginning the process. The EPA and ethanol producers have yet to agree on a method to test and track pollution levels, let alone what those levels should be capped at.

For the Great Lakes Radio Consortium, I'm Jonathan Ahl.

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