

The Importance Of Being a Watchdog

What is a watchdog?

A watchdog is someone who critically monitors the activities of industry and alerts the public or government agencies when the actions violate laws or regulations, or go against public interest.

Why should you be a watchdog?

We need watchdogs because industry is largely self-regulated, and the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) relies on self-reporting from operators. The DEP itself is understaffed and underfunded, and unable to keep up with regular monitoring of individual sites. Watchdogs can provide an extra level of protection and safety to their community. They often identify issues early, and get them resolved before further damage is done.

Where do I start?

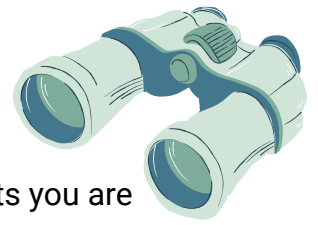
- First, know your area. Be aware of ordinances, boundaries, and where industry should or should not be operating.
- Look for signs of a problem
 - Water running where it shouldn't be/signs of erosion
 - Discolored or cloudy water running off a site and into a waterway
 - Unusual smells, tastes, and sounds - it's not normal to smell something!
 - New containment structures
 - Increase in truck traffic
 - Security posted on or near the site
 - Change in behaviors of industry workers



Remember: You know your community best. Trust your gut when something doesn't seem right. If you're unsure if it's a violation, it's best to record and report to the DEP.

What to document

- Location - write down the crossroads and any identifying features. Record the company and site by taking a picture of their sign or truck on site. Cell phones will create a time/location stamped photo that can be useful for reporting purposes.
- Illegal Activities - Be familiar with environmental laws such as the clean water act, clean streams law, and clean air act so you are able to document any violations.
- Impacts to Air quality - Record any flaring, leaks, or releases. Document if you can smell or taste anything in the air, and any accompanying health changes such as irritated eyes, nose, and throat.
- Noise/light - Document any lights, noise, and other work happening at night. Check municipal ordinances, but most industrial sites should not be operating at night.
- Equipment malfunction - Document any broken or malfunctioning equipment or if you can tell there is lack of maintenance to equipment and buildings.
- Water pollution - note any possible chemical spills or silted water. Document any sinkholes, erosion, and sediment control failures.
- Cover yourself - document that you're not on property or obstructing work, or document if you have owner's permission to be on property.



What to document continued...

- Your own personal experience living near the site - Document any health impacts you are experiencing, changes in your drinking water, air pollution if you have monitors near your home, truck traffic, and flaring.

Best Practices

- Do not trespass on work sites or obstruct or impede the work or progress.
- Be cordial and respectful of workers, but you do not have to respond to all questions.
- Respect the homeowner's property and right to privacy. Even if you have permission to be on their property, always notify them when you are there.
- Do not take unnecessary safety risks. Be careful of exposure to contaminants, and be aware of what you may be bringing home with you on your clothes and shoes.
- Use a buddy system. For safety reasons, it is best to watchdog with someone, or to share your location and plans with a friend.
- Document your reporting - what number you called, date and time of reporting, who you spoke with, and what was discussed. When reporting over the phone, always get an email address and follow up phone conversations with an email.

Know Your Rights

- Know the local laws. Check the local municipal ordinances so you can go in with the confidence that you are within your rights.
- Know the boundaries of the property and whether you are on public or private property. You have the right to be on public property, and you may be on private property if you have permission from the property owner.
- You have the right to document and to take video in public as long as you are not impeding workers.
- Know that you may be photographed, filmed, asked to leave, and threatened with calling the police.



Where to Report

- Call 911 for safety hazards
- Call PA-DEP regional offices or 24 hour emergency number after hours 1-800-541-2050
- File a complaint online w/ DEP <http://www.depgreenport.state.pa.us/EnvironmentalComplaintForm/>
- EPA Region 3 EMERGENCIES:
 - To report spills and environmental violations,
 - call the National Response Center at 1-800-424-8802
 - For the online complaint form: <https://www.epa.gov/aboutepa/epa-region-3-mid-atlantic>
- Call local Co. Conservation District, DCNR, Fish & Game
- Call the Public Utility Commission (PUC) 1-800-692-7380
- Call the Pipeline and Hazardous Material Safety Administration (PHMSA) 1-800-424-8802
- Contact ATSDR- <https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/>
- Army Corps of Engineers (trenching only, wetlands/waterways/dams) <https://www.usace.army.mil/>
- Notify local township leaders, state Representatives and state Senators
- Use Social Media and Press to get the message out