

Q. How long have these exceedances gone on at Mountaire's Millsboro plant?

A. The Department of Natural Resources and Environmental Control's Groundwater Discharges Section has been working with Mountaire Farms for the last two months (early September to the present) to address concerns about elevated nitrogen concentrations at the spray irrigation facility as part of Mountaire's ongoing permit renewal process. Exceedances of other permit parameters have occurred, too, but infrequently, according to reports made to DNREC.

On Sept. 6, 2017, Mountaire contacted the Department to report acute and significant permit exceedances at the facility, including very high levels of fecal coliform and high levels of total nitrogen, total suspended solids, and biological oxygen demand based on laboratory analyses of routine samples taken on Aug. 30 and 31. Of greatest concern to the Department were the high levels of fecal coliform. On Sept. 13 and 20, Mountaire provided the Department with 5-day letters documenting the measured non-compliance in accordance with their permit conditions.

Q. What's being done to remedy the problems at Mountaire Millsboro?

A. On Sept. 8, the Department directed Mountaire to take immediate actions as necessary to minimize the potential for impacts to public health and the environment and to bring the facility back into compliance. These actions included substantially reducing the amount of acreage being used for spray irrigation, limiting the conditions under which spray irrigation could occur, and collecting more frequent samples of Mountaire's effluent. On Sept. 15, the Department submitted a letter to Mountaire that formalized and expanded upon the previous verbal directive to the Millsboro facility. The Department also began independently collecting and analyzing samples of the treated effluent.

The Department initiated dialog with Mountaire and is continuing to work with the company on developing and implementing immediate and long-term corrective actions to bring the Millsboro facility's treated effluent into compliance with permit limitations. On Oct. 3, samples taken of the facility's treated effluent showed that fecal coliform levels were within permit limits and levels continue to be in compliance as of this time. On Nov. 2 the Department issued an Notice of Violation (NOV) to Mountaire citing the effluent violations at the facility and requiring submission of a corrective action plan documenting all short-term and proposed long-term corrective actions to return the facility to a compliant status.

Q. What's the potential impact on the public, particularly residents living near the Mountaire facility?

A. The Department's immediate public health concern was working with Mountaire to ensure that the company minimized the potential for human contact with the treated effluent, due to the high fecal coliform levels. As of Nov. 6, the Department is not aware of any reported cases of human contact with the effluent during the period of exceedance for the Millsboro facility. The Department will continue to monitor Mountaire's efforts, including significant facility upgrades, to establish and maintain long-term compliance.

In addition, the Department is collaborating with Mountaire and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to ensure that corrective actions already in place to mitigate high nitrogen levels in groundwater remain in place. These corrective actions include providing bottled water and/or providing drinking water treatment to affected residences immediately adjacent to the Millsboro facility. In addition, the Department partnered with the Division of Public Health's Office of Drinking water to sample the potable wells of adjacent properties to assess current status of nitrate levels in their area. The Department also continues to monitor Mountaire's daily operations as they pertain to DNREC spray irrigation permit conditions.