

NEWS Local Economy Environment

What's that Smell? As Weather Warms, So Does a Perennial East Van Debate

The neighbourhood tries to balance stinky climate change solutions with livability. But when is funk not functional?



Michelle Gamage / 30 Mar 2021 / TheTyee.ca

Michelle Gamage is a journalist and photographer based in Vancouver with an environmental beat. You can find her on Twitter [@Michelle_Gamage](#).

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West Coast Reduction Ltd. sits in the industrial area of Vancouver, located behind barbed wire and several train tracks. But smell from the plant still impacts nearby businesses, like Andina brewery, says owner Andrés Amaya. Photo by Michelle Gamage.

There's a funk that drifts through the air on hot, still summer days in Vancouver's Grandview-Woodland neighbourhood. Locals describe it as rancid, fishy, bloody, sour and chemical — enough to turn your stomach.

The smell is linked to the industrial zone a few blocks to the north, where West Coast Reduction Ltd., or [WCRL](#), runs a rendering plant at 105 N. Commercial Dr. The plant processes the chunks of food waste most British Icky? Kinda. But the rendering plant, built in 1964, plays an important role in the Lower Mainland's food production and waste management industry — even contributing to keeping food prices down, according to the company.

Still, residents in surrounding East Vancouver neighbourhoods have a history of unhappiness with the plant, and perennially raise concerns about the area's livability due to smells and pollution.

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Every few years, WCRL reapplies for a permit from Metro Vancouver to discharge certain gases and contaminants. This is standard practice throughout the industry and a way for government to regulate air pollution.

In the company's latest application, the company asked to expand its operating hours and to increase the amount of pollution it can emit. Some in the neighbourhood raised a stink.

In an interview with The Tyee, Ray Robb, Metro Vancouver's division manager for environmental, regulatory and enforcement services, said more than 240 people have submitted comments about the application through Metro Vancouver. That's a lot of comments for an application — maybe the most ever, Robb said.

There's also a petition to reject the permit renewal, with more than 780 signatures as of March 29. The petition cites concerns about adding more pollution to a densifying neighbourhood.

The tension from neighbours is pushing WCRL to look for a new plant location in the Lower Mainland within the next 10 years, says Ken Ingram, WCRL director of technical and environmental services.

Closing the plant before then would harm local food producers, cause Vancouver's greenhouse gas emissions to spike and result in 400 skilled workers being laid off, he added.

Ingram says rendering is like sewage treatment — people don't like thinking about it but are sure glad it's there.

He explains the role of the plant. When an animal is slaughtered, about half will be processed for food and eventually end up on a plate. The other half — think heads, guts, fins, blood, bones and feathers — is sold to renderers. That sale keeps food prices down, because producers make money selling both halves of the animal. Rendering cooks fish, chicken, pork and beef “byproducts” until all that's left is water, fat and protein.

WCRL also collects 62 million pounds of used cooking oil from thousands of restaurants in the Lower Mainland and renders the oil into fats. Animal byproducts make up around 90 per cent of the material rendered and cooking oil 10 per cent.

The protein is sold to B.C. feedstock and pet food companies, which loops the protein back into the food web. The fat is sold to biofuel companies in Canada, the United States and Asia, where it will mostly become diesel.

WCRL “recycles” close to two million pounds of material daily, or 250,000 tonnes per year.

Ingram says if that heap of organic material was composted instead of rendered, a lot more greenhouse gas, such as methane, would be produced. The company also reduces global shipping by supplying local markets with protein, which would otherwise be imported.

All in all, according to WCRL, the plant's annual operations reduce greenhouse gas emissions equal to keeping 150,000 cars off the road.



That's not to say the process doesn't pollute. WCRL burns natural gas to cook and burn off odours, which creates over 102 tonnes of annual emissions.

In its recent application, WCRL asks to run the machines for longer so it can better render fats for biofuels, Ingram says. If approved, that'll bump WCRL's total permitted pollution to over 126 tonnes.

A little over half of that pollution comes from nitrogen oxides, or NOx; a group of gases that includes both nitrogen dioxide and nitrogen oxide. Health Canada says NOx can hurt the respiratory tract, and nitrogen dioxide can cause coughing and wheezing.

Unfortunately, it's also a common air pollutant. And WCRL is far from the only emitter.

In 2015, Metro Vancouver calculated 59,200 tonnes of NOx were released in the lower Fraser Valley. The rendering plant would have contributed a little under 0.01 per cent of that.

Emissions aside, business owners in the area say smell is their biggest concern.

"I absolutely hate it," said Andina Brewing Co. owner Andrés Amaya, who describes the smell as a rotten fish funk that hangs out most warm days.

Amaya says he wants to build a patio at the brewery's Powell Street location but worries customers will be chased off by the smell from the neighbouring plant. Amaya says he supports Metro Vancouver denying WCRL a new permit.

A block away, Callister Brewing Co. co-owner Chris Lay takes a more resigned approach. After all, the plant was here first, he says, so Lay knew what he was getting into — adding its smell is noticeable but not detrimental to the brewery.

Ingram says WCRL's facility uses a negative air pressure system, air scrubbers and extreme heat to capture and clean all bad smells, so odour "isn't really a problem anymore."

"We'd never say, 'You'll never smell a rendering plant if you're living near it,' but we think it'd be hard to find another rendering plant in the world that has as effective odour control as ours," he says.

Up the hill in the heart of Commercial Drive, bakery owner Claire Lassam says she chose to open Livia on Kitchener Street because opening a store any closer to the rendering plant could hurt her business. When people smell bread, they want to buy bread, she says. She also lives in the neighbourhood and is concerned about potential pollution exposure but supports maintaining industrial space in the city.





Claire Lassam runs the bakery Livia on Commercial and Kitchener. When scouting locations for her business, Lassam says she looked at a spot closer to the WCRL plant but turned it down because she was concerned the smell could impact sales. Photo by Michelle Gamage.

The challenging thing with smell is that it's incredibly personal, explains Amanda Giang, assistant professor at the University of British Columbia Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability, and department of mechanical engineering.

Giang is part of the team behind Smell Vancouver, an app launched in December to map when, where and how people experience bad smells. Researchers plan to collect data for two years to try and understand the relationship between odour, health and air quality, which isn't that well understood, Giang says.

For example, if two people smell the same smell, one person's mood, sleep or stress level could be impacted, and the second person could be fine.

Some smells carry a warning, like how natural gas is made to smell like rotten eggs. But other smells are, well, just bad smells. That doesn't mean people should just plug their nose and carry on, says Giang.

"Those impacts to well-being are not trivial. Anyone who has smelled something really offensive knows those impacts can themselves impact your quality of life," she says.



Bad smells can impact your mood and how you sleep, and that can impact your quality of life, says UBC assistant professor Amanda Giang. Photo submitted.

So what happens now? Robb says his team at Metro Vancouver will review the permit application, weigh the comments and look at what WCRL could reasonably do to prevent, collect, treat and disperse future pollution.

Metro Vancouver previously tried to restrict smell, measured in odour units, but the restrictions were overruled by the Environmental Appeal Board because smell is subjective, Robb says. That's why Metro Vancouver regulates contaminants, but not smell.

"We try to issue permits to fairly and reasonably balance all interests," Robb

we try to issue permits to fairly and reasonably balance all interests," Robb says.

A new permit will likely make everyone equally unhappy — previous permits have been appealed by both WCRL, for being too restrictive, and by citizens, for not restricting enough, he says.

WCRL's current permit runs until June 5, 2021 and Robb says a new permit likely won't be issued until closer to that date.

Until a new permit is issued, people can comment on the application through [Metro Vancouver's website](#).

Robb adds that submitting a comment is different than filing a [complaint about smell](#). ■

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Tara Sundberg

4 years ago

Ah, yes the East Van stink!!
Can you imagine if this plant was in Kitsilano? It would have been shut down decades ago...
I used to live right up the hill from Westcoast Reduction (about 16 blocks away) and yes you could definitely smell the distinct death scent. For someone with a particularly acute olfactory like mine it was very unpleasant. I didn't like it at all. I feel for the residents living closer to the plant.
That said, the service provided and its proximity to the city do save significant environmental costs. I don't envy the city staffers on this file.
Ultimately the city should decline the application for an expansion of the stink. Too many people live here and will receive no benefit from the company's expanded operations.

4

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Sandy Bauer

4 years ago

Tara Sundberg

Nice to read a balance comment . There are legitimate & important arguments on both sides. I'm glad I'm not having to make the decision.

3

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kilgorettrout91

4 years ago

Tara Sundberg

I've said that line about Kitsilano to so many people I know

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Chevy

4 years ago

Tara Sundberg

UBC is doing a similar investigation on the stink smell and noise in Burnaby.
lots of things happens between 11:00pm and 0700am.

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kilgoretrout91

4 years ago edited

As a longtime renter in the neighbourhood, this article has actually somewhat changes my mind on the issue - if the smell keeps gentrifying businesses at bay then I support the rendering plant

2 0



Sandy Bauer

→ kilgoretrout91

4 years ago

Your ability to really hear all rational sides of the issue (both fact and opinions/feelings) is a heartening sign of maturity & Intelligence.

0 0



Sub-Boreal

4 years ago

I haven't lived in East Van for 30 years, but the memories of summer nights are flooding back ...

2 0



Jed maple

4 years ago

If you eat animal products, zero compassion. This is part of what you are destroying the planet to eat.

They probably sell in the market what comes out of here anyway.

2 3



John Gregson → Jed maple

4 years ago

You reap what you sow! Stop eating food and the problem will go away.

2 0



Kiskatinawkid

4 years ago

Burning a fossil fuel (natural gas) to create biofuels to be burned by "green" technologies. Sounds par for the course.

0 0



satanclaus → Kiskatinawkid

4 years ago

102 tonnes of emissions to render 250,000 tonnes of waste into feedstock.

Google "circular economy".

Emitting carbon is but one of many different ways that humans can mess up the environment. Seems like this plant does a lot more good than harm on that front...except for the smell!

0 0



puppyg → Kiskatinawkid

4 years ago

Not unlike recharging an electric car with energy from a coal-burning plant.

0 0



anne cameron

4 years ago

They can't vent the stinky stuff at midnight, when people are usually sleeping?

0 0



phodgson → anne cameron

4 years ago

What, like pulpmills.

0 0



anne cameron → phodgson

4 years ago

Don't know if it still happens, but when I lived in Nanaimo, on those days when the wind was "the wrong way" some folks would greet others with the question "izzat you mac, or Harmac?"

Ah, jobs... everyone puts up with a lot of grunge and discomfort so as to ensure jobs...

Sub-Boreal

4 years ago

And just imagine when the big quake comes and those huge storage tanks rupture!

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H

henney

→ Sub-Boreal

4 years ago

This is BC. Those things don't happen here, we all know that.

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