



Tipsheet from Inside the Investigation: Environmental Stories

Keep digging even if you get a “no records” response

The Texas Commission on Environmental Quality initially did not produce records when asked about ethylene oxide-emitting warehouses. But by digging into the agency’s own public permitting databases we found permits for Cardinal Health’s warehouses that clearly referenced ethylene oxide emissions. Whether there was nefarious intent in this case or not, agencies often organize records in ways that don’t match the language reporters use in records requests. Public databases, permitting portals, enforcement logs, and emissions inventories can reveal documents that records officers either overlooked or did not interpret as responsive.

Center people first

The investigation worked because it was anchored in people like Vanessa Dominguez, whose home backed up to a Cardinal Health warehouse, and the warehouse workers. Instead of leading with modeling or toxicology, we showed families living beside ordinary-looking warehouses, children playing in nearby parks, and workers who did not know what chemicals they were exposed to.

Design investigations so other reporters and communities can localize them

We intentionally created a roadmap others could use to find warehouses in their communities. We published a database of warehouses, released guides in English and Spanish, explained our methodology, and encouraged local journalists and residents to investigate facilities in their own communities.