

## Company officials: Equipment fixes to stop airborne fiber nearly complete at Summerville plant

By Jenna-Ley Harrison [jharrison@journalscene.com](mailto:jharrison@journalscene.com) Aug 3, 2018



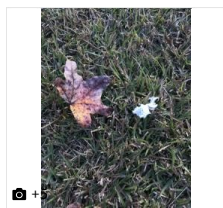
Work crews install one of four new bag houses (grey item) at the Lauscha Fiber International plant in Summerville. Officials with plant's parent company, Unifrax, said they expect the equipment fixes to prevent additional unexpected fiber releases in the future. Contributed/Unifrax



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A fiber manufacturing plant in Summerville is expected to have all equipment installations complete by the end of the month to prevent any more unexpected fiber releases.

Since at least 2001, residents and businesses surrounding Lauscha Fiber International on East Port Lane have reported finding white material pieces covering their parking lots, lawns, homes and cars, according to the South Carolina Department of Health and Environmental Control.

But the site, with some equipment dating back 20 years, received new ownership in 2013. New-York based Unifrax Specialty Fibers LLC purchased the plant; and company officials said at the time they were fully aware of the site's persistent problems and tried to make minor tweaks to solve airborne releases.

"We should've done something sooner, to be frank," said Joe Kuchera, vice president of product stewardship and compliance. "We want to be good neighbors. Certainly, we do not want trash or dust escaping our facility."

But the new equipment is expected to solve the ongoing problem.

"Our investment in the new dust control systems...should be a very significant improvement," Kuchera said.

Unifrax produces high-temperature materials for insulation and other industrial uses; environmental materials for catalytic converters in vehicles; and specialty fibers for certain types of car batteries. Lauscha is Unifrax's only specialty fibers plant in the United States—specializing in melting glass beads into microfibers used in certain large-scale batteries and air filtration devices. The glass is composed of silicon dioxide, made from sand, according to Unifrax officials.

The dust control systems going in at the local plant primarily consist of four new bag houses. Work should be complete by the end of August, though site cleanup will continue much longer into September, Kuchera said. Heat and rain the last couple months have caused some delays in the work.

During the course of the installations, the plant has also had to scale back production to keep random releases at bay.

"When we are installing bag houses for the related production lines, they are shut down to prevent dust releases," Kuchera said.

promise to fix malfunction

From now until Aug. 31, the plant will only operate the lines attached to new equipment. While sporadic fiber spewing has occurred since spring, Kuchera said company officials reported the "small excursions" to DHEC before the issue worsened—and made the appropriate repairs.

"We caught them early, shut down the related production lines and repaired immediately," he said.

Since at least January, community members living in the Club at Pine Forest, Clemson Terrace and Trotters Ridge—all neighborhoods within a 3-mile radius of Lauscha—have raised concerns about the potential health hazards of breathing in the airborne particulates. While some residents remain skeptical, officials with both Unifrax and Dorchester County have reiterated the same response: the material isn't toxic.

Earlier this year Unifrax even hired a third-party consultant to conduct air quality testing in different locations around the plant. Company officials also scheduled two separate community meetings with residents in the last year to listen to concerns, explain the fiber's chemical makeup and detail planned solutions to the releases.

Lauscha also has a new plant manager, Brian Mellett, who took over in February for Jay Fuller, serving in the lead role temporarily after the previous plant manager Kenneth O'Brien left in 2017. Kuchera said Mellett transferred from the company's plant in Tonawanda, New York.

Unifrax owns 27 manufacturing facilities located in 12 countries, according to its website.

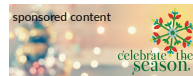
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#### Jenna-Ley Harrison

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