

IRE AWARDS

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41 pgs

1. Category: Network/syndicated program
2. Linda Mason, Vice President, Public Affairs, CBS News
3. Reporters whose work is entered, in order of who contributed most work and who an IRE member: Helen Malmgren, David Gelber. Note: neither of us is an IRE member.
4. Name of program: Ed Bradley on Assignment: TOWN UNDER SIEGE
5. Date Aired: December 23, 1997
6. See attached letter
7. We were researching a story about American oil companies in Latin America when an expert in the field told us that the same story existed in America, especially in Louisiana. We then called parish councils and environmentalists in Louisiana, looking for a town that was dealing with this problem in an organized way, and they led us to Grand Bois.
8. Major types of documents used: Discovery from several court cases, hospital records, Louisiana and Alabama state environmental agency field reports, EPA notes from the field and rough drafts of reports on oil field waste.
9. Major types of human resources used:
 - Persons who experienced effects of living or working with oil field waste (Townspeople, workers, families of workers)
 - Plaintiff's and defense lawyers involved in cases similar to the one in this story.
 - Oil producers
 - Scientists and engineers from EPA, ATSDR
 - Staffers from committee that passed the RCRA exemption in 1979
10. Results: See Attached
11. Follow up: None yet.
12. Advice to other journalists planning a similar project: Be absolutely sure you have

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12. (Continued)

nailed down the specific and health aspects of the story before you begin following the lives of the people affected by it. If you are sure that your science is sound, then your story can weather all of the rhetoric it may stir up among lawyers, politicians, activists and other journalists who pick up the story late and may make mistakes in their own coverage about your project.

13. Difficulty, uniqueness of effort, or other special circumstances related to this subject:
 - a. Exxon tried to derail this project by seeking a gag order and a set of protective orders in court and by seeking to subpoena both Helen Malmgren and David Gelber. Although CBS fought Exxon's attempt and eventually beat it in Louisiana's Supreme Court, Exxon created a distraction that repeatedly diverted our energy and attention from the story itself.
 - b. Although the harmful elements of oil field waste had been studied thoroughly by the EPA, the results of that study were misrepresented to Congress by political appointees, as we reported in our documentary. Furthermore, federal agencies like EPA and ATSDR were forbidden from regulating oil field waste after 1987, with the result that many of these agencies' current scientists and engineers had no expertise and could not readily give us any opinions about this waste, and we had to find The people who had studied the waste 10 to 20 years ago. We also relied on off-the-record industry and state agency experts. Finally, we asked environmental health experts to study the raw data we collected and assess it for us. All of them supported our suspicions that this waste was dangerous and should not be dumped or treated near communities.
 - c. Although oil field waste is one of the country's biggest waste streams and could affect millions of American families, very few people know anything about it because it is not defined, categorized or regulated like other waste streams from other industries. Therefore, we found ourselves asking policymakers--most notably, Carol Browner--questions about problems they'd never thought about. When we asked Browner for an interview, she investigated

13c., continued

the issue and decided that the loophole we were investigating was a "sweetheart deal" for the oil industry, unlike anything else she knew of in any environmental statute.

14. Length of time taken to report, write and edit the story: 13 months

15. Did you build any electronic databases? Yes.

- a. We worked with a company called IRE to build a database showing the number of people living within 5 miles of an oil field (a distance which the EPA suggested to us as a fair measure of enhanced risk because of oil field waste). This database showed population by age, race, and income in the five biggest oil-producing states, and in one state that produces little oil. To create the database, we used software and census information that the EPA had used for a similar study on mining. We found, for instance, that 86 percent of Oklahoma's population lived within five miles of an oil field, as did 73 percent of the population in Louisiana, and 83 percent of the population in Texas. This study gave us the information we needed to portray our story as a national issue. IRE did not charge us for this study. We did, however, pay \$50 to the U.S. Department of the Interior for a CD Rom copy of their geological survey mapping program.
- b. We created a partial database of hospital records in the town of Grand Bois that showed type of illness, when it occurred, diagnosis, and whether it coincided with similar illnesses in town and a wind blowing off on the waste site next door. We created this database with the help of an epidemiologist from ATSDR. This revealed a pattern that confirmed what we had learned anecdotally about the problems in the town, and also confirmed what local doctors and LSU Medical Center's doctor Patricia Williams's health study said about the town's illnesses.
- c. We encountered difficulties putting together the database on the town's health records because, although we easily obtained releases from the people in town, we found that the local hospital's records were very disorganized and spotty, and often were not kept on computer.
- d. We did not FOIA any information for this story.