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## Fearing illness, residents want oil field waste pits closed

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GRAND BOIS, La. (AP) - Lush fields of sugar cane and grazing cattle offer no clue to approaching visitors of the environmental turmoil here.

The first indication is a network of signs - black-lettered omens in almost every front yard along Highway 24, which winds through this tiny community southwest of New Orleans and past 140 acres of open waste pits.

"If you are reading this," one reads, "you're being exposed to toxic chemicals."

Above it, a sign nailed to a telephone poll advertises cancer insurance.

Closer in, a faint but annoying rotten-egg stink hangs in the air. Residents say the smell is milder since their outcry reached lawmakers in Baton Rouge. But it's still there.

So are the 16 waste pits, which contain or have contained benzene, toluene, arsenic, barium, hydrogen sulfide and lead. One of the pits - Cell 11 - lies just 300 feet from the nearest house.

The town's 318 residents hope to shut the pits through a lawsuit that blames U.S. Liquids, which bought the site last year, for health problems stemming from the waste, including respiratory infections, burning eyes, chronic headaches, nosebleeds, asthma and rashes. They worry the list may eventually include cancer.

The lawsuit is scheduled for trial in May, but the state, long considered environmentally reckless, is taking a closer look at Grand Bois now. The Department of Natural Resources is drafting regulations governing oil field waste disposal.

"I will not tolerate Louisiana citizens having to live near a facility that is not safe," Gov. Mike Foster said this fall. "On the other hand, businesses that are operating legally and contributing to the economy should be able to operate without being harassed on the basis of unproven allegations."

In the early 1980s, Congress drew up extensive regulations on disposing waste considered a threat to human health or the environment. But hard lobbying by the oil industry persuaded Congress to exempt any material from exploration, development or production of oil or natural gas.

Put starkly, benzene from a chemical plant is considered hazardous. Benzene from an oil field is classified nonhazardous - by rule, not by science.

The distinction is lost on Grand Bois residents. Toxins are toxins, they say.

U.S. Liquids maintains it's obeying the law, and air monitoring equipment the state Department of Environmental Quality installed at Cell 11 last summer has shown nothing out of the ordinary.

"There's no scientific evidence that indicates ... any health effects from the operation of this site," said U.S. Liquids division manager Jerry Brazzel.

But Wayne Crawley, a consultant for Campbell Wells, the company that operated the site before U.S. Liquids, said in a sworn deposition the pits were the likely source of unusually high levels of barium - 10 to 100 times greater than normal - that showed up in tests of Grand Bois attics. Barium, a heavy metal, can cause muscle spasms, stomach problems and sometimes heart ailments.

"The problems citizens are experiencing are very consistent to exposure to the exact type of material contained at U.S. Liquids," said Gladstone Jones, the lawyer representing Grand Bois residents, who questioned Crawley under oath.

The state's health officer also acknowledges the chemicals in the waste pits - in high doses and with prolonged exposure - can cause headaches, respiratory problems and maybe even cancer.

"The question is, how much of these chemicals do we have and how much gets to the community?" Health Officer Jimmy Guidry said.

Thirty-three sites in Louisiana take oil field wastes, but only four others are set up with pond-like disposal pits like Grand Bois; 28 are deep injection wells. The Grand Bois pits opened in 1982. Residents say they noticed smells from the very start, but those early odors were nothing like the stench that blew over the community in March 1994.

That's when 81 trucks loaded with sludge from an Exxon site in Alabama rumbled down Highway 24, and workers in protective gear dumped 5,600 barrels on the trucks into the pits.

Each truck carried a manifest stating that the barrels contained "environmentally hazardous substances," according to the residents' lawsuit, filed in April 1994.

"The smell was unreal. It would cut your breath," Clarice Friloux recalled recently from the front porch of her home on Highway 24, just a mile and a half from the waste pits.

"We watched our kids get off the school bus that day with their T-shirts over their faces. We thought, something is wrong. Something is very wrong."

The health problems followed.

"Those were the sickest little babies you ever did see," Blair Bonin said of his two children, now 10 and 17, who were plagued by sinus and respiratory infections as infants and toddlers and who still complain of symptoms. Bonin said his own sinus problems have worsened.

"It's got to be the pits," he said. "That's got to be a part of it."

Ms. Friloux once spent her days tending pigs, poultry and horses while caring for her young children at home. Now she organizes town meetings, lobbies legislators, serves as Grand Bois' spokeswoman and helps lawyers map strategy.

"Before all this started, I used to think I had a boring life. Now I wish I could go back to that. Sometimes I get 46 calls a day," Ms. Friloux said.

A phone call in October sent her scrambling to Baton Rouge, a four-hour round trip, to hear the governor announce the drafting of new regulations. When final, the regulations will require two things:

- That wastes be tested twice, at the oil field and again at the disposal facility, to see what toxic substances are in any particular shipment. The state will supervise the tests.

- That oil fields and disposal facilities reduce the toxins in waste to safe levels. Natural Resources Secretary Jack Caldwell said it would take months for state agencies to determine those levels and to develop ways to bring waste into compliance. "This is new territory," he said. "No one has ever done this before, so we have nothing to pattern it after."

Meanwhile, a statewide survey of oil sites to determine just what toxic substances they hold is 80 percent complete, Caldwell said. An the state health department is working with Louisiana State University Medical Center to test the blood of local children. The health agency will review the tests and residents' health histories starting next month.

But Ms. Friloux says the monitoring and testing is small comfort.

For one thing, she says, the state equipment monitors air only near Cell 11, the one closest to homes and the one mentioned in the lawsuit. But that pit, its surface dimpled with cattails and grasses swishing in the breeze, has not received fresh wastes since the lawsuit was filed. Oil field waste is continually dumped into the 15 other cells, which are not being monitored, she says.

Added Bonin, the father of the sick children, "It's too little, too late."

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