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## Residents say illnesses linked to toxic oil pits

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GRAND BOIS, La. (AP) - From the bank, the small pond appears to blend in with the natural marshland beauty of the community of Grand Bois.

Dragonflies swarm among the cattails and birds swoop down to preen within the grasses. A steady hum of insects buzzes from a grove of trees on the opposite side.

But the natural beauty of this "lake," labeled Cell 11 on a nearby sign, is deceptive. Its murky depths and those of the other 15 cells nearby have, at some point, contained benzene, toluene, arsenic, barium, hydrogen sulfide and lead, along with low-level radioactive debris.

Ordinarily, treatment of these chemicals would require strict monitoring and detailed emissions reports. But Cell 11 is an oil field waste pit and is subject to a special exemption enjoyed throughout the U.S. petroleum industry. Sludges and chemical wastes that would require careful handling in any other industrial setting can be dumped there in open pits with little monitoring.

The distinction is lost on nearby residents. Toxins are toxins, they say in a lawsuit that blames the 70-acre pit and its operator, U.S. Liquids, for health problems ranging from respiratory infections and burning eyes to constant headaches.

U.S. Liquids, which runs several oil field waste sites around the state, has a ready reply. The company, formerly known as Campbell Wells, contends it is following the protocol allowed under federal and state laws for treating oil field waste.

But a fight is brewing to adjust those laws and Cell 11 is at the center of it. The battle over the facility came to the state Legislature this session as Sen. Michael Robichaux of Mathews pulled out all the stops to close it, including a well-publicized vote trade on raising legislative pay. His tactics failed, done in by oil industry lobbyists and behind-the-scenes string-pulling by Gov. Mike Foster, he said.

But the outcry, combined with interest from national television crews, has prompted Foster to take another look at the facility's operations, a departure from his staunch pro-industry stance. Meanwhile, the 300 residents of Grand Bois wait with plugged noses and picket signs for their January court date, unwilling to give up a fight that has lasted more than three years.

A strong smell of petrochemicals hangs in the air at U.S. Liquids as tanker trucks come and go from the yard. Although the fumes can cause a headache for visitors within an hour or so, division manager Jerry Brazzel said no workers have complained of getting sick.

The facility accepted 1.2 million barrels of waste in 1995, more than 50 million gallons. Some of it arrives as produced water, a combination of saltwater and organic chemicals that come to the surface when oil and gas wells are drilled. This liquid, which often contains benzene, toluene and lead, is pumped and injected deep into the ground through wells, along with rainwater and other runoff liquids.

But most of the trucks and ships drop off loads of material known as drilling mud, which contains chemical additives and naturally occurring metals such as barium, chromium, arsenic, lead, cadmium and zinc. U.S. Liquids also accepts low-level radioactive waste, known as "naturally occurring radioactive material," which contains radium.

Operations at the facility, which first opened as a waste site by Intercoastal Oilfield Fluids in 1983, always bothered Clarice Friloux, who lives about a mile and a half down the road from Cell 11. When Campbell Wells took over in 1991, it seemed as if the smells wafting through the community from the pit grew more foul.

"Some days it was worse than others," Friloux said. "Some days you can take it. Some days you can't."

During those years, the company was cited numerous times for failing to guard adequately against the release of chemicals into the air and water outside the site. But the problem escalated in March 1994 when Exxon shipped more than 81 truckloads of pit sludge from a site in Alabama.

Workers in protective gear dumped 5,000 barrels into Cell 11, located less than 500 feet from one home. A strange smell blew over the community and neighbors began gathering in a subdivision, Friloux said.

"My brother called and said, 'Are you smelling that smell?' " she said.

Many people in the area felt sick. A woman driving by in a car had to be hospitalized.

"The headaches started right away," she said.

For nearly three weeks, most residents, including children, suffered from stomach pains, sinus problems and other ailments.

Although a Department of Environmental Quality inspector suggested the smell was caused by hydrogen sulfide within the sludge, the department never tested for

the substance, according to documents compiled by New Orleans lawyer Gladstone Jones. But the tests did show higher than average levels of benzene, a chemical that can cause cancer.

Tests also have shown levels of barium in residents' attics, between six to 10 times higher than usual background levels, said Jones, who is representing about 300 Grand Bois residents in their suit against the company. Other volatile chemicals are released into the air every day, with no monitoring system in place, he said.

"God only knows what's coming out of there," Jones said. "I've got a bunch of sick people and we know this stuff is getting into their homes."

"These companies know these materials are toxic and bad for people," Jones said. "They have ignored the toxic properties and the ability of these materials to injure people. If you knowingly expose people to these types of materials, whether it's legal or not, then you got to pay for it."

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