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U.S. Liquids has public relations nightmare

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BATON ROUGE, La. (AP) - Many companies under an environmental microscope often forget what the words "public relations" mean.

Last week, a group of legislators were set to tour U.S. Liquids, which is adjacent to the LaFourche Parish community of Grand Bois.

U.S. Liquids operates an oil field waste site. The site consists of 140 acres of deep, open pits where sludge and other wastes from drilling and production sites are dumped.

The company has come under fire from Grand Bois residents who say that waste dumped in the open pits, located just 300 feet from the nearest home, is toxic and is making them sick. They say they've been plagued with numerous health problems ranging from respiratory infections and burning eyes to constant headaches, nosebleeds, asthma and rashes.

They want the waste site closed.

Their outcry has attracted attention, especially from the media. A CBS television crew from "60 Minutes" has been in the state for months doing a special on Grand Bois and the influence of the oil and gas industry.

The attention has proved a public relations nightmare for U.S. Liquids.

The company has maintained throughout that it has done nothing wrong, that the way it disposes of waste is in compliance with state and federal laws. And it probably is.

Congress drew extensive regulations in the early 1980s spelling out how waste considered a threat to human health or the environment was to be disposed of.

But hard lobbying by the oil industry prompted Congress to exempt from the new rules any material coming from the exploration, development or production of oil or natural gas.

In other words, if benzene comes from a chemical plant, it's considered hazardous. If it comes from an oil field, it's classified as nonhazardous - by rule not by science.

Until last week, U.S. Liquids had been responsive to media inquires about its operations. The company allowed reporters and photographers on site and returned reporters' phone calls.

That's why it didn't make sense when the company decided that the media could not tag along if lawmakers toured U.S. Liquids. Why bar reporters now, after many have already been there? Why shroud a visit with lawmakers in secrecy?

Even Gov. Mike Foster, who is so aggressively pro-industry, seems to understand the importance of good public relations. He announced last month that all waste coming to U.S. Liquids would be tested to see if it contains unacceptable levels of toxic substances. Those tests are currently being developed.

Foster didn't say how the waste would be disposed of if found to have unacceptable levels of toxics.

U.S. Liquids' decision to ban the media during last week's scheduled visit by lawmakers was announced by legislative leaders, who promptly canceled the tour. They said environmental issues are too important to discuss behind closed doors.

Lawmakers went ahead with the rest of their schedule, traveling to Houma to hear a presentation on Grand Bois and to hold a public forum for Grand Bois residents.

Sen. Michael Robichaux, who fought unsuccessfully during the past legislative session to close U.S. Liquids, wanted lawmakers to at least go into Grand Bois and ride past the open pits, which are visible from the road.

His request was denied and legislative leaders demanded that lawmakers not visit U.S. Liquids, although a few disobeyed orders.

U.S. Liquids should not have kept the media away from the tour. A company under fire would do better to keep open its doors, instead of slamming them shut in the public's face.

(U.S. Liquids said later that it didn't want television cameras on site, but that policy effectively shut out all media.)

In addition, lawmakers should have been allowed to go into Grand Bois, to see the community and talk with residents there. And if they couldn't visit the U.S. Liquids

facility, they should have been allowed to walk or drive past it. They should have demanded to do this.

They could ultimately decide the fate of U.S. Liquids and Grand Bois residents. They should at least gather all the information they can about the situation so they can make good, sound decisions if called upon.

But that may be too sensible for government work.

Leslie Zganjar also covers the Capitol for The Associated Press.

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