

The People vs. The Toxic Landfill

BY RYAN CURTIS

Residents of Warren County, North Carolina, spent more than 20 years protesting the placement of a toxic waste dump in their community. In 1982 North Carolina state officials surveyed 93 sites in 13 counties and chose Warren County, a predominantly rural, poor, black county as the site; the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) permitted the landfill under the Toxic Substances Control Act.

The landfill was constructed to hold 60,000 tons of soil contaminated with polychlorinated biphenyls — chemicals more commonly known as PCBs. It became necessary after a trucking company from New York dumped over 30,000 gallons of waste transformer oil contaminated with PCBs along North Carolina roadways. The company was attempting to get rid of the oil because the EPA had banned the resale of the toxic transformer oil.

After months of deliberations and consideration, it was decided that the toxic soil should be dumped in Afton, a small community in Warren County in which 84 percent of the population at the time of the construction of the landfill was black. This site, however, was not considered the most scientifically suitable. The water table under the landfill was shallow, averaging only 5 to 10 feet below the surface; this was an especially big problem in Warren County, where many residents got their drinking water from local wells.

However, Warren County residents were quick to oppose the dumpsite. The county twice took the state to court, but failed to stop the landfill's construction. Local residents then organized with civil rights leaders, church leaders, elected officials, environmental activists and others to protest the toxic waste dump in their community. The state began hauling the contaminated soil to the site in September 1982; in all, over 6,000 truckloads of soil were dumped in the landfill.

For six weeks, protestors used peaceful civil disobedience to express their disapproval of the state's choice for the placement of the dump and try to prevent the area from being filled. Activists marched in front of the site and even went so far as to lay down in front of the trucks as they attempted to deliver the contaminated soil to the landfill. By the end of September, 414 protestors had been arrested, and in all, more than 500 would be arrested for protesting the placement of the waste site.

While they were unable to stop the state from dumping the soil, the demonstrations of the local protestors caught national attention. They influenced the Congressional Black Caucus to call for an investigation regarding toxic waste dumps and the communities they were in; a report released in 1983 by the U.S. General Accounting Office reported that racial minorities



PCB and dioxin contaminated soils were treated with a high capacity indirect thermal desorption unit for the Warren County Landfill cleanup.

made up a majority of the population in three out of the four communities with hazardous waste landfills in eight southern states.

The Warren County protestors inspired the United Church of Christ to form a Commission for Racial Justice; this commission produced a report in 1987 in which they concluded that communities near waste sites were more likely to be inhabited by African-Americans and Hispanics than Caucasians.

These two reports helped to bring environmental racism and justice into the national consciousness, where it has become a big issue to a variety of people and groups.

Although they couldn't stop the landfill from being constructed and filled with toxic soil, residents of Warren County did not give up their fight. They created the Warren County Working Group, comprised of local residents, state employees and environmental organizations. The group analyzed the situation for years, finding that it was not only possible but essential that the site be detoxified. After years of continued protests and pressure on government officials, the state of North Carolina finally began detoxification work on the site in 2001. The operation cost \$18 million, and once detoxified, the soil was put back into a large pit, covered and seeded with grass. The last cleanup work finally ended in January of 2004.

Even decades after the construction of the landfill in their community, the residents of Warren County and the protestors who helped them continue to stand out as a shining example of normal people using nonviolent means to bring about change. As the first case concerning environmental racism to garner national attention, it assisted in bringing environmental justice into the public consciousness. Today, the EPA has a National Environmental Justice Advisory Council and eliminating environmental racism is an ongoing concern of the federal government. ■