



Global Nonviolent Action Database

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Black Pensacola residents win relocation from Escambia Wood Federal Superfund site 1992-1996

March

1992

to: 3 October

1996

Country: United States

Location City/State/Province: Pensacola, Florida

Location Description: Pensacola, FL is home to an additional EPA Superfund site on the National Priorities List, Agrico Chemical Company. The two Superfund sites are located near a mixed residential and industrial neighborhood. The area is comprised of predominantly Black and low-income residents.

Goals:

To have 358 households relocated from the Escambia Wood Superfund site by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA).

Methods

Methods in 1st segment:

- 005. Declarations of indictment and intention
- 013. Deputations
- 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 2nd segment:

- 011. Records, radio, and television
- 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 3rd segment:

- 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 4th segment:

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 5th segment:

- 001. Public speeches
- 006. Group or mass petitions
- 007. Slogans, caricatures, and symbols

- 008. Banners, posters, and displayed communications
- 015. Group lobbying
- 047. Assemblies of protest or support
- 048. Protest meetings

Methods in 6th segment:

- 010. Newspapers and journals
- 048. Protest meetings

Classifications

Classification:

Change

Cluster:

Economic Justice

Environment

Human Rights

Group characterization:

- Environmentalists
- Escambia county residents
- environmental justice activists

Leaders, partners, allies, elites

Leaders:

Citizens Against Toxic Exposure (CATE), Margaret Williams, David Stallworth

Partners:

Wilma Subra, Subra Company, Lois M. Gibbs, Joel Hirschhorn

External allies:

Greenpeace, the Sierra Club, Florida Audubon Society, Friends of the Everglades, Clean Water Action, Southern Organizing Committee, Center for Health, Environment, and Justice, Agrico Chemical Company Superfund site

Involvement of social elites:

Representative Earl Hutto (D-Pensacola), Carol Browner, Robert Martin

Joining/exiting order of social groups

Groups in 1st Segment:

- Citizens Against Toxic Exposure (CATE)
- David Stallworth
- Margaret Williams

Groups in 2nd Segment:

- Center for Health Environment and Justice
- Clean Water Action
- Florida Audubon Society
- Friends of the Everglades
- Greenpeace
- Joel Hirschhorn
- Lois M. Gibbs
- Representative Earl Hutto (D-Pensacola)
- Southern Organizing Committee
- the Sierra Club

Groups in 3rd Segment:

Groups in 4th Segment:

Groups in 5th Segment:

Groups in 6th Segment:

Segment Length: 11 months

Opponent, Opponent Responses, and Violence

Opponents:

Environmental Protection Agency (EPA)

Nonviolent responses of opponent:

No nonviolent responses of opponent.

Campaigner violence:

No campaigner violence.

Repressive Violence:

Authorities threatened to cut off utility services, including water and light. Police officers also used intimidation tactics to influence residents to move.

Success Outcome

Success in achieving specific demands/goals:

6 points out of 6 points

Survival:

1 point out of 1 points

Growth:

3 points out of 3 points

Notes on outcomes:

On 3 October 1996, EPA officials released a statement that declared the relocation of all 358 households near the Escambia Wood federal Superfund site. The EPA decision was highly significant because this community was the first predominantly Black neighborhood to be relocated by the federal government.

From 1943 to 1982, Escambia Treating Company (ETC) operated in Pensacola, Florida. Located in an industrial/residential zone, the location of a wood treatment facility threatened the health of Escambia County residents, who were primarily Black. Until the mid-1950s, ETC dumped creosote and pentachlorophenol (PCP) into an uncovered pit. In March 1992, community members founded Citizens Against Toxic Exposure (CATE) and launched a five-year campaign for relocation of the 358

households closest to the Escambia plant.

During the ETC's operation, stormwater runoff carried the dumped toxins to downhill residential communities, like Rosewood Terrace. Community members complained that the facility made the air smell foul, and the well water oily. Many people kept their windows shut to prevent the smell from entering their homes. A number of people suffered from cancers, respiratory diseases, and reproductive disorders indirectly linked to toxin exposure.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) launched an investigation of the contaminated ETC facility in September 1991, after a high volume of complaints from Pensacola residents. The company had declared bankruptcy earlier in the year and abandoned the facility. Community members informed the EPA that the abandoned building held open chemical drums and broken lab equipment. The agency declared the site a public health emergency and uncovered high levels of PCP and dioxin in the neighborhood's soil.

As a temporary cleanup solution, the EPA placed excavated soil in a 60-foot high pile, prompting the site's unofficial designation as "Mount Dioxin." Nearby community members recorded increases in nosebleeds, nausea, and skin rashes due to the dust blowing off the mound. In response to the cleanup process, residents of Rosewood Terrace, Oak Park, Goulding, and Clarinda Triangle created CATE. Margaret Williams, president of CATE, commented on the EPA's cleanup process stating, "this recklessness would not have occurred in non-minority or wealthy neighborhoods."

On 8 March 1993, CATE and other environmental organizations hosted a press conference calling out the Florida state legislature for its prioritization of business over people. The news conferences addressed legislative proposals that sought to limit public participation in development, and establish a fast-tracked industry permit process. Environmentalists and environmental justice activists believed the proposed legislation threatened the Panhandle ecosystem, making Escambia County residents more susceptible to environmental injustices. Organizations in attendance included: Greenpeace, Florida Audubon Society, Friends of the Everglades, Clean Water Action, and the Sierra Club.

To gain public support for CATE's campaign, Williams reached out to the Southern Organizing Committee in Atlanta and Lois M. Gibbs of the Center for Health, Environment, and Justice. In addition, CATE received a \$50,000 grant from the Agrico Chemical Company Superfund site; at the time, the group couldn't receive a grant for Escambia because it had not been classified as a Superfund site.

The Agrico grant allowed CATE to hire a former government employee, Joel Hirschhorn. An expert in Superfund related issues and an environmental consultant, Hirschhorn proved that the cleanup harmed the community more than it helped. David Stallworth, vice president of CATE, threatened legal action against the EPA in 1994 based on Hirschhorn's findings. Members of CATE pleaded with the EPA to add Mt. Dioxin to the National Priorities List (NPL).

On 9 November 1993, CATE advocate, Representative Earl Hutto (D-Pensacola), testified before the House Subcommittee on Technology, Environment and Aviation. The U.S. Congressional hearing focused on the research and further development of the federal Superfund program. During the hearing, Hutto lobbied for proper cleanup of Escambia. Hirschhorn also served as a witness to support Hutto's plea and demonstrate the need for an improved program.

CATE's actions influenced the EPA to place Escambia on the Superfund NPL in December 1994. At the time, Escambia trailed behind Love Canal and Times Beach as the third largest Superfund site in the United States. The EPA designated \$100 million for cleanup of the site, and CATE continued to push for relocation, referring to the plastic tarp covering Mt. Dioxin as a band-aid.

On 2 October 1995, two CATE officers traveled to Washington, D.C. to protest Superfund program budget cuts. Accompanied by nearly 25 environmentalists, Williams and Frances Dunham participated in a street-corner demonstration on Capitol Hill. During their time in Washington, Williams and Dunham also spoke to Carol Browner, administrator of the EPA, and Elliot Laws, assistant administrator of the EPA. After Williams told Laws he needed to reassess the Mount Dioxin cleanup, the EPA sent its Superfund official, Robert Martin, to Pensacola.

Martin pushed for soil tests in residential areas. The results showed that the ground surrounding 16 homes had been contaminated above acceptable levels. On 16 December 1995, after years of denying the health risks associated with Escambia, the EPA announced plans to move 126 families. The agency considered three options: permanent relocation, temporary relocation until site cleanup, or relocation until disposal of the soil in a landfill. The number of households eligible for relocation increased each month that year, and the government ultimately released a plan outlining the relocation of 257 households.

Unsatisfied with partial relocation, CATE hosted a meeting at New Hope Missionary Baptist Church in August 1996. Over 350 residents attended the meeting and presented federal officials with petitions for a relocation plan that included all 358 households. Community members also delivered public speeches and held placards that read, “No more studies-move us now!”

Williams participated in the EPA’s National Environmental Justice Advisory Council (NEJAC) during May 1996. She presented CATE’s relocation plan at the Superfund Relocation Roundtable, hosted by the NEJAC Waste Subcommittee, and garnered widespread support from participating grassroots organizations. At the meeting, Williams successfully convinced the EPA to nominate the ETC site for its first relocation pilot program.

Gibbs also persuaded government officials to act by taking out a full-page ad in the Florida edition of USA Today. Published on 1 October 1996, the ad displayed a photo of kids playing near the mound. Captioned, “no child should ever have to live near a hazardous waste site,” the quote called out President Bill Clinton for his lack of support.

Two days after the ad, on 3 October 1996, the EPA released an official statement guaranteeing the relocation of all 358 households. CATE’s actions prompted an \$18 million plan that marked the EPA’s first relocation of a Black community under the Superfund program. Most residents moved by 2001, and by 2003, the Escambia County Commission and City of Pensacola approved the demolition of remaining abandoned homes.

Although CATE achieved its ultimate goal, residents claimed environmental racism riddled the relocation plan. Low assessments of the residents’ homes made it difficult for some community members to buy as good, or better, homes than their originals in Escambia. Residents, like Jean Roshell, who refused to move, risked the authorities shutting off their utilities. They also faced intimidation tactics, often watching police cars cruise outside their homes. As of June 2007, the EPA planned to bury the contaminated soil rather than cleanup the ETC site.

Research Notes

Influences:

Citizens Against Toxic Exposure (CATE) were influenced by Concerned Citizens of Norco's relocation campaign in Diamond, LA, in which the group also participated. (1)

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