

Oil in Gulf: Bad. Oil in Landfill: Not Bad?

by Robert D. Bullard

When British Petroleum's deepwater oil well exploded in April 2010, the media focused on the massive leak and the clean-up efforts. However, there has not been much public discussion about which communities were selected as the final resting place for BP's oil-spill garbage. What has happened to the thousands of tons of polluted sand, oil-coated materials, and other refuse that washed ashore?

Cleaned Up and Dumped Where?

As of July 2010, 55.4 percent of the waste from the BP oil spill has been dumped in communities that are mostly people of color. (See table on p. 45.)

This is not a small point since African Americans make up just 22 percent of the coastal counties in Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, and Louisiana, while people of color comprise about 26 percent of the population in coastal counties.

Clearly, the flow of BP oil spill waste to Gulf Coast communities is not random. There is a pattern in the U.S. of sending waste to communities of color. In 1982, toxic PCBs were cleaned up from North Carolina roadways and later dumped in a landfill in mostly black and poor Warren County. We also saw the pattern in 2009 when 3.9 million tons of toxic coal ash from the massive Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) power plant spill in East Tennessee was cleaned up and shipped more than 300 miles south by train and disposed of in a landfill in rural and mostly black Perry County, Alabama.

Sacrifice Zones

For decades, African American and Latino communities in the South became the dumping grounds for all



kinds of waste — making them “sacrifice zones.” Gulf Coast residents, who live on the fenceline with landfills and waste sites, are asking why their communities should be the final resting place for so much of the waste from the giant BP oil spill. (See pp. 46-47 for more on landfills.)

Environmental Justice

This pattern of using communities of color as dumping grounds for toxic waste gave rise to the environmental justice movement in the early 1980s. Community members continue organizing today. In Florida, David Guest, an environmental attorney with Earthjustice, said he's had calls from anguished residents asking about legal recourse to stop oil spill debris from reaching the Springhill Landfill near Campbellton in Jackson County. “There's a genuinely serious risk of poisoning the aquifer years from now,” Guest said, arguing that the landfills, once closed, are not monitored.

In Harrison County, Mississippi, where the Pecan Grove Landfill is based, community members persuaded the board of supervisors to pass a resolution not to accept BP waste. Residents were worried that the estimated 1,200 tons of oil-tainted by-products dumped at the landfill would contaminate its soil and water. “We're left to deal with it 15, 20 years later if and when this landfill has a problem. BP



is long gone, and we're stuck with the problem. Nobody is going to say I'm sorry," Holleman said.

Robert D. Bullard is director of the Environmental Justice Resource Center (EJRC) at Clark Atlanta University and author of Race, Place, and Environmental Justice After Hurricane Katrina: Struggles to Reclaim, Rebuild, and Revitalize New Orleans and the Gulf Coast (Westview 2009).

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Where is the BP oil being dumped?

| State and Landfill | Tons of waste from the clean-up | % of people of color within a 1-mile radius |
|--|---------------------------------|---|
| Alabama | | |
| Chastang Landfill, Mount Vernon | 6,008 | 56.2% |
| Magnolia Landfill, Summerdale | 5,966 | 11.5% |
| Florida | | |
| Springhill Regional Landfill, Campbellton | 14,228 | 76.0% |
| Louisiana | | |
| Colonial Landfill, Ascension Parish | 7,729 | 34.7% |
| Jefferson Parish Sanitary Landfill, Avondale | 225 | 51.7% |
| Jefferson Davis Parish Landfill, Welsh | 182 | 19.2% |
| River Birch Landfill, Avondale | 1,406 | 53.2% |
| Tide Water Landfill, Venice | 2,204 | 37.6% |
| Mississippi | | |
| Pecan Grove Landfill, Harrison | 1,509 | 12.5% |

Making Sense of the Numbers

Compare. How could the people near the Springhill Regional Landfill in Florida compare their situation to that of the people who live near the Pecan Grove Landfill in Mississippi?

Think about proportion. 22-26% is the typical population of color in the region. So you'd expect any dump to affect about 25% people of color and about 75% white people. Which community comes closest to that proportion? Which community has the most disproportionate representation?

The author claims that more than half of the waste is going to communities with a majority of people of color. Can you confirm this? How?