

Abandoned landfill threatens health of rural Tennessee residents

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A landfill in Camden, Tennessee, approximately 80 miles west of Nashville, was abandoned by its owner last year, leaving a likely candidate for a federal Superfund site and nearby residents facing years of continued exposure to toxic waste.

Environmental Waste Solutions (EWS) walked away from the 42-acre site, nicknamed “Black Mountain” by those who live in the area because of toxic sludge leaking out of the 30-foot-high landfill, after its owner declared bankruptcy last year.

“The landfill is leaking heavy metals including lead and cadmium, which is a very big problem,” environmental attorney Elizabeth Murphy told the *Tennessean*. “Cadmium is dangerous because it causes liver damage.”

Murphy is representing residents of Camden in Benton County, one of the poorest counties in the state. With an estimated 2016 population of about 16,000, Benton County’s median family income is just \$32,720 while the median household income is only \$28,679.

Although the employment situation in Benton County has improved recently, it still lags behind the state and nation. In January of this year, the unemployment rate was 6.4 percent, higher than the state rate of 3.8 percent and the national rate of 4.1 percent.

About 15 percent of the population and about 12 percent of families live below the poverty line, including almost 24 percent of those under the age of 18 and 11.7 percent of those 65 and older, according to Homefacts.com.

Poor, sparsely populated rural communities are prime targets for operations like landfills to conduct business “out-of-sight, out-of-mind.” Often, residents are desperate for jobs and local officials are prepared to look the other way, letting landfill operators get away with environmental crimes that put workers and their

families at risk.

In April of last year, Benton County District Attorney Matthew Stowe huffed, puffed and threatened to prosecute the company and its executives over their abandonment of the landfill.

“We are looking at felony charges based on the current lack of safety-ness and white-collar charges based on how they were operating,” Stowe said. “The entire time they were operating they should have been putting money aside to close this place down. If they haven’t done so, the operation is a fraud and we will pursue white collar crimes. We will not allow large corporations to bully their way into our communities under false pretenses, endanger the lives of innocent children and the property of our citizens, and walk away.”

But walk away they did, and so far, there is no evidence of pending indictments or criminal charges.

The Tennessee Department of Environment and Conservation (TDEC) was left to clean up the mess. But the state agency does not have a sterling record of clean-ups, nor has it covered itself in glory in dealing with the landfill, despite county residents complaining since EWS took over the dump.

According to the *Tennessean*, TDEC promised residents to begin closing the landfill last fall, but “they have since delayed the timeline for months.”

Rather than antagonistic, the relationship between the landfill operator and the state agency has the appearance of a joint venture aimed at maximizing profits with minimum regulations, and when problems arise there are “safe hands” to be found, often the same hands that created the problems.

According to the *Tennessean*, the TDEC hired the firm Civil and Environmental Consultants to test groundwater near the landfill after hazardous waste was

first detected in 2016. This was the same environmental consulting agency used by EWS to design the landfill.

The Camden residents' lawyers sued, and discovered "the firm neglected to include in its permit design plans that the city's drinking water line flowed under the landfill blueprint, which would have derailed approvals for the landfill to operate under state environmental law," the newspaper reported.

When EWS took the landfill over in 2011, it was being used for disposal of construction demolition debris and shredded automobile tires. But the new owners, with the approval of TDEC, soon began accepting "special wastes," defined as "either difficult or dangerous to manage," the *Tennessean* reported.

The USA TODAY Network in March of last year reported that TDEC had approved hundreds of such permits statewide to dispose of "special wastes" in landfills permitted for construction debris and household waste.

Some of the waste in Camden came from Nyrstar, a mining and metal company in Clarksville, Tennessee. Nyrstar's record of pollution prompted *Forbes* magazine to put Clarksville on its list of "most toxic places" in the United States, according to the *Clarksville Leaf-Chronicle*.

Once the Camden landfill began taking in Nyrstar's "special wastes," residents began complaining of the strong smell of ammonia coming from the dump, dusty residue on their cars, burning eyes and headaches.

Mike Melton lives next to the landfill and has complained about headaches and the smell of ammonia coming from the dump. But he is concerned for more than just himself.

"I am concerned about where we are going from here," Melton told the *Tennessean*. "Who will own the property and who is going to maintain it? Who is going to keep testing the water? I have grandkids, and we have to be sure that we're not leaving them in a mess where they're going to have to be dealing with this 20 or 30 years from now."



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