

Silent Summer

Georgia community organizes against pesticide manufacturing waste

by Cathy Strong

Eds. Note: This is the story of the contamination of a community, the poisoning of people, irresponsible corporate behavior, the failure of government to effectively regulate and enforce hazardous waste disposal of “wash water” from pesticide manufacturing and formulation, and a community taking action in response. Moreover, it is a story that links hazardous pesticide use and hazardous pesticide disposal, the cradle-to-grave poisoning outcomes that EPA does not consider in its risk assessments for pesticide regulation.

We all want to believe that our governmental agencies are protecting us. But in my community nothing could be further from the truth. The events that began in south Fulton and north Fayette Counties, Georgia in May 2006 and have continued to today seriously threaten our health and the environment. This is a story of poisoning and contamination from hazardous pesticide waste processing that none of my neighbors or anyone in my family knew was going on right in our community!

Our community is in the south metropolitan area of Atlanta. Ranked the nation’s 15th most desirable rural county in which to live, Fayette County’s population is 104,248 and average family income is over \$100,000 (2005). The school system is rated one of the best in the state. There is no heavy industry around us. Or rather, we thought there wasn’t.

A failure to enforce

Philip Services Corporation (PSC) Recovery Systems is located in Fairburn, Georgia, South Fulton County, a few hundred yards north of the Fayette County line and about four miles from my home. The South Fulton PSC facility was purchased from Fulton County ten years ago and was converted from a sewage treatment plant into a sewage pre-treatment plant, specifically for non-hazardous materials.

For ten years, PSC has held a sewage pre-treatment permit from Fulton County and a permit from the Georgia Environmental Protection Division (EPD) to treat non-hazardous in-



Protesters talk to an official outside of Governor Sonny Perdue’s First Annual Georgia Environmental Conference.

dustrial waste. The EPD permit establishes specific guidelines and requires PSC to file an annual report citing the total volume of waste treated, material and/or chemicals handled, and material buried in the regional landfill. The permit specifically prohibits handling of hazardous materials at the South Fulton County PSC plant. PSC has never, to date, provided any of its required annual reports to EPD. And, EPD has NEVER done anything to enforce the submission of these reports

In the Spring of 2006, PSC knowingly began accepting for “treatment” huge volumes of liquid waste, or “wash water,” transported by highway from Alabama.

The disaster

In May 2006, people living, working and traveling near the PSC plant were overwhelmed by a putrid stench. This odor became stronger near the end of June and even worse in July, reaching a peak during the July 4th weekend. The odor could be detected over a 200-square-mile area. Residents in an area



Citizens picket a state environmental meeting in Savannah.

of approximately 40 square miles, labeled the “hot zone,” were considered most at risk by Fayette County Emergency Management Services (EMS). Fayette EMS personnel were the first responders on the scene and it was they who identified the source of the odor as the PSC plant.

During the early summer and continuing through the present, many people became ill with serious, mysterious complaints. Most of these illnesses were respiratory, leading to difficulty in breathing and asthmatic attacks. There were severe headaches, severe chest pains, nausea and vomiting attacks, excessive salivating, sweating or tearing, muscle twitching, weakness, tremors, lack of coordination, dizziness, nausea, vomiting, abdominal cramps, diarrhea, respiratory depression, tightness in the chest, wheezing, cough, fluid in the lungs, blurred or dark vision, kidney failure and bloody urine. There has been one very sad case of a person whose ALS (amyotrophic lateral sclerosis) may be a result of organophosphate exposure. Those who could afford it obtained palliative treatment but no meaningful diagnosis or curative care from either their own physicians or a hospital. Over 750 people documented their complaints to local officials within the month of July. Ultimately, over 1,000 people reported being sickened, including my family.

Heavy rain and winds from May through August did not remove the odor from the “hot zone.” The first thing my family noticed was the disappearance of the frogs. Then we, and the neighbors, realized that all of the perching birds had died or fled. A beekeeper living next to the PSC plant lost half of his hives, the first time he has ever lost any bees during the summer. The wildlife became silent. The previously healthy pets of many residents near the PSC plant succumbed to illness or death, as some veterinarians diagnosed with reasonable certainty the cause as toxic chemical exposure.

Community response

In early July, affected residents began to gather to protest the unacceptable conditions that they were being forced to live in. This was the birth of the South Fulton and Fayette Community Task Force. An exposure report form was created in English and

Spanish. Neighborhoods were canvassed. Town hall meetings were held. Petitions for immediate closure were signed and forwarded to officials. Fayette and Fulton County EMS recognized that they did not have the resources for dealing with this type of emergency, so they joined affected citizens in requesting assistance from EPD.

After countless telephone calls and several personal visits to EPD headquarters, we finally got Georgia EPD, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and the Georgia Department of Public Health (DPH) to begin responding to our pleas for air sampling, inspection of the plant, and epidemiological studies.

Inadequate government response

EPD offered nothing in response to our requests for medical diagnosis, advice and treatment. EPD and DPH persistently changed the subject whenever we suggested that a dangerous organophosphate pesticide, related to nerve gases and known to be a component of the wash water, was the most likely cause of our problems. They focused instead on a less toxic material with the same odor as the object of their investigations. This negligence corresponded to the tack being taken by the management of the PSC plant, which continued to publicize, even with newspaper advertisements, that “the odor,” while regrettably unpleasant, was nevertheless “harmless.”

From July 3 to 6, air sampling for the odorant (not the pesticide) were carried out by EPD, which, despite acknowledging the order, said nothing was registering on the equipment!

Response of PSC management

The source of the odor was ultimately acknowledged by both PSC and EPD to be “wash water” from the pesticide manufacturing process. They also had to admit that it had been trucked on interstate highways from the manufacturer (Bayer Crop Science) and packager (AMVAC Chemical Corporation) in Axis, Alabama. This “wash water” was purported by PSC to contain small percentages of the pesticide ethoprop, similar concentrations of the odorant propyl mercaptan, and varying percentages of chlorides and other chemicals.

PSC has not been willing to describe the chemistry of the hazardous, volatile threat agents, the way it actually “processed” this hazardous waste, or the chemical reactions necessary to truly “decontaminate” or “disarm” them. As nearly as we can piece together from confidential sources, “treatment” consisted largely of bubbling air upward through 20,000 to 30,000 gallons of wash water for seven days at ambient temperatures (Georgia summer temperatures!), while stirring with double-

decker paddles in an uncovered vat. We have learned that symptoms like those described above were common among plant workers, largely undocumented workers who speak little English and were offered little safety instruction and no personal protective gear. Vomiting on the floor was routine, but the occasional meeting between management and employees focused on denying to the media that any problem might exist.

Continuing environmental threat

Ethoprop (trade name MOCAP) is a very dangerous organophosphate insecticide and nematicide compound. Environmental Defense's Scorecard ranks ethoprop as one of the most hazardous chemicals to human health. According to EPA (IRED Addendum, 2006), ethoprop is persistent and does not readily undergo photodegradation or hydrolysis. In other words, any amount of ethoprop that was deposited with us last summer IS STILL HERE and would explain continuing illnesses.

EPA classifies ethoprop as a "likely" human carcinogen. It is estimated that approximately one million pounds of ethoprop are used in the U.S. annually on corn, potatoes, sugar cane, tobacco and other agricultural crops. Ethoprop and its metabolites are acutely toxic to mammals. It is especially toxic to birds.

On September 15, the Task Force received the results of EPA testing on some of the railcars to which the "wash water" was transferred from the tanker trucks. The following chemicals were found to be present: ethoprop, propyl mercaptan, dipropyl disulfide, toluene, and chloroform. It was also confirmed by our State Representative Virgil Fludd that sludge samples from the PSC facility also tested positive for ethoprop. With no data regarding the PSC wastewater processing system, it is not possible to determine what amounts of vapors and/or liquids have been released into the surrounding neighborhoods. PSC is not willing to describe their processes, leaving the citizens with many unanswered questions.

PSC states that it is operating within the limits of its permit, and EPD agrees! PUBLICLY! Both entities state that there is no scientific evidence that PSC is responsible for any of the reported health problems. Our Task Force is demanding that PSC close and take responsibility for the poisoning and chemical trespass. Many local communities, including the Fayette and Fulton County Commissions, have passed resolutions demanding the closure of PSC.



Chairwoman Constance Biemiller shares her community's story.

EPA of no help

U.S. Representative David Scott sent a letter to the administrator of the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) requesting the closure of the plant until it has been determined to be safe. He got a response from the regional administrator of EPA in Atlanta, saying, "[T]he information available to EPA indicates that the PSC facility is moving forward appropriately with addressing decontamination, site operation, and other issues stemming from the odor incident."

Evolution of the Task Force

Our Task Force continues to advocate for change with some success. We have requested that PSC's county pre-treatment permit not be renewed, eliminating the company's ability to utilize our sewer systems for disposal of liquid waste. It has not been renewed and PSC has agreed not to re-apply for a pre-treatment permit from Fulton County for at least six years. They can no longer dump from that plant into our rivers and streams. However, some plant activity continues, and the clean up that will have to take place at the facility has yet to be determined. We are very concerned.

We are raising funds to continue the work of the Task Force to ensure the clean up of our community. Our legislative committee will continue efforts to change Georgia laws that allow big business to dump on us. We will work for pesticide regulation, changes in EPD, and alternatives to pesticide use.

The Task Force plans to conduct video interviews with affected families to document the poisoning. Wherever you live, if you have been poisoned by ethoprop or pesticides of any kind, get on the record!

The Task Force also has a protest committee. In addition to occasional picketing, we mount telephone and email campaigns to communicate our needs to local, state and federal politicians. Other committees focus on media, medical and legal issues.

The Task Force is fortunate to have excellent people on all of these committees, as well as dedicated leadership. We have unintentionally become active stewards of our local natural environment while attempting to protect the health of our families.

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