Making a statement

Eleven protesters arrested in roadblock of Lake Charles PPG plant

LAKE CHARLES (AP) — Environmental activists chained themselves to the tops of two buses blocking the main railroad entrances to a PPG chemical plant for most of the day Wednesday.

By Wednesday afternoon, authorities had removed both vehicles — a school bus and the Greenpeace Coach — and arrested 11 protesters. The Sheriff's Office said it expected all of those arrested to be bailed out by Wednesday night.

About a dozen Greenpeace activists who converged on the plant from across the country sought to block shipments of vinyl chloride, a byproduct of which is dioxin. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has said dioxin can cause cancer and birth defects.

Calcasieu Parish sheriff's deputies broke in the door of one bus and arrested those inside before climbing onto the roof and cutting chains that were linked to the protesters on top.

The other vehicle remained on the tracks well into the afternoon, with more protesters inside. Two locked themselves in a cement vault inside the bus, Sheriff Beth Lundy said.

Deputies used jackhammers to break through the vault. Lundy said all would be charged with trespassing and could face federal charges for blocking railroad tracks, Lundy said. Several activists who left peacefully when authorities arrived were not arrested, Lundy said.

Carol Gregory, a Washington, D.C.-based Greenpeace spokeswoman who traveled to the PPG plant, said the protesters offered no resistance to arrest and that authorities were not unnecessarily aggressive.

"We'd call it a big success," Gregory said. "It was really heartening to see residents showing support. They came out with water and food and are still calling to see that we're OK."

The protest came on the same day that the Louisiana office of the U.S. Public Interest Research Group released a report claiming that Louisiana ranks first among all states in releases of toxins that are believed to cause brain or physical developmental disorders in children.

The Greenpeace protest in Lake Charles, meanwhile, was part of a global strategy to generate support for phasing out the use of chlorine in the production of vinyl and plastics, Gregory said.

In South Africa next week, 121 countries are expected to participate in the fifth round of discussions on a United Nations treaty aimed at banning some of the most toxic industrial chemicals, including dioxin.

Greenpeace activists say they're not looking to put chemical plants out of business, but rather to encourage them to use alternative and safer methods of production.

Greenpeace began the protest Wednesday morning by driving their buses through security fences and parking them on the tracks.

"They just blasted through and parked in the middle of railroad tracks where chemicals are transported," Lundy said. "In terms of public safety, they crossed the line, so we had to make the arrests. We don't get involved in the issues, but they put lives in jeopardy."