Plant sites: Is racism an issue?

Many are convinced while industry says no

By Bob Anderson
Environmental editor

Chemical plants, refineries and waste companies have built a disproportionate number of facilities near minority communities in Louisiana, representatives of some of those communities allege.

“I find it hard to believe that some of these decisions (on-site locations) could be explained in any other way” than racism,” said Bob Kuehn of the Tulane Environmental Law Clinic.

Industry representatives deny they consider the race of the surrounding neighborhoods when deciding where to build a plant.

Allegations of environmental racism are a relatively new turn for both the environmental and civil rights movements—a turn that may be bringing the power of those two movements together.

Some have even called for changes in civil rights law to tailor portions of it to deal with environmental racism.

Blacks and other minorities “suffer disproportional effects of cancer, birth defects” and other health disadvantages, said Wendy Brown, a professor at Tulane University Law School.

“Clearly the siting of hazardous waste and chemical facilities in communities of color is a violation of civil rights,” but gaining justice under the current Civil Rights Act is difficult, Brown said.

“What may be obvious discrimination to any thinking person may not be sufficient in court,” she said. “The most difficult hurdle is showing the intent to discriminate.”

There is no intent to discriminate, said Dan Borne, head of the Louisiana Chemical Association.

Site selection is based on such things as deep-river ports, rail transportation, abundance of land, the presence of natural resources, access to pipelines and availability of chemical feedstocks, he said.

“The racial makeup of the surrounding community is not, nor has it ever been,” one of the criterion,
The Advocate looked at the neighborhoods of industry and waste sites across the southern part of the state, it was apparent that predominantly black communities are more likely to be next to heavy industries that pollute. But there were exceptions.

For instance, the community of Cut Off, located between chemical plants and the Mississippi River, is white. The community fought a proposed industrial landfill south of Lafayette is white. And the people who live next to the abandoned Combustion Inc. waste site in Livingston Parish and a number of other abandoned hazardous waste sites are white.

It appeared that economic status was more of a common denominator than race in south Louisiana communities located next to industries. In most cases, the neighborhoods are poor or modest. Heavy, polluting industries were not found next to rich and politically powerful communities.

Many environmentalists interviewed, both black and white, said they feel that industries are less likely to try to locate next to a community that has the power to fight them, and that is why the plants are built near communities that are poor and often black.

"Race plays a large part," but politics and the economic situation of the community also are factors, said Theresa Robert, an Ascension Parish environmentalist. Robert's organization won its decade-long battle to keep a hazardous waste site from moving into its community. She said the victory was partly because the members of the group were able to afford the large legal costs necessary to fight.

"If we had been a poor black group, we wouldn't have been able to do it," she said.

"What it generally boils down to is the politically powerless communities are the ones most dumped on," said Darryl Malek-Wiley of the Gulf Coast Tenants Association, a mainly black organization that cares for itself and its members, which include environmental and housing issues.

Other targeted communities are minorities, he said. A Vietnamese neighborhood is next to one of the state's latest proposed landfill sites, he said.

This trend is continuing today, said Natalie Walker of the Sierra Club Legal Defense Fund. She said she is involved in two cases where major industries are moving in next to "culturally rich" black communities.

"In one case, a Formosa Plastics site will adversely affect the century-old community of Wallace, she said.

"In the other, a uranium enrichment plant, which will store thousands of tons of radioactive waste in Claiborne Parish, will be near to the black community of Forest Grove. The plant will sever the road that historically has connected Forest Grove to a sister, black community nearby, Walker said.

"Plants and largely black communities do share the same neighborhoods," but it is not because industries have made a decision to discriminate against blacks, Borne said.

"Many LCA companies built on old plantation sites where the surrounding community probably was, and may still be, predominantly black," he said. "Some facilities were built in rural areas that had no communities around them until years later. In some cases, the surrounding community had been mostly white, then changed over time."

Louisiana chemical companies chose sites "based on sound business criteria that match their special type of manufacturing to the state's unique and diverse natural resources," Borne said.

Another indication of the link between race and pollution is the proximity of industries to Bureau Rouge's two universities, said Florence Robinson, a professor at Southern University.

LSU, a predominantly white university, has no plants near it that are large enough to be required to submit federal toxic emission reports, while Southern, a historically black university, is in the part of the parish that contains most of those discharges, she said.

The Local Emergency Preparedness Committees are primarily made up of white men and are stacked by government representatives and people connected with industry, added Janice Dickerson of the Gulf Coast Tenants Association.

While pollution may be "colorblind in that it affects everyone negatively," there are indications "minorities may bear a larger burden of the total risk," said Paul Temple, an LSU environmental professor and former secretary of the state Department of Environmental Quality.

Poor people generally have "less access to government," he said.

Wednesday: A look at ways industry and communities can co-exist.