On uncertain ground

Bayou Corne residents wonder what a sinkhole will mean for their homes and futures.

Bayou Corne — Dennis Landry and his wife Pat can sit on the deck behind their home on the Bayou Corne, watching the fish jump and the breeze blow through the moss-draped cypress trees. Their subdivision of 27 homes is called Sportman’s Paradise.

But there’s trouble in this paradise. More than 13 months ago, an acre of land to the southeast gave way and sank into the earth, the beginning of what’s been called the most extensive industrial accident most Americans have never heard of. The sinkhole that formed Aug. 3, 2012, has since grown to 25 acres and may get bigger still.

Despite evacuation orders, the Landrys are among the 40 or so families who have stayed in the area near the sinkhole.

“It’s hard to leave your home when you have a real nice place,” Landry said. “Bayou Corne is a beautiful bayou paradise, and so we weren’t about it to just give it up. We wanted to stick it out a while and see what would happen next.”

But “a lot of people got scared,” Landry said. “A lot of people are very much concerned.”

The sinkhole itself could grow another 60 percent to 40 acres, according to the state government’s best estimate.

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QUESTION OF THE DAY

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homes were destroyed, but fears center on the possibility that flammable gases, which have been bubbling on area waterways, could work their way into homes in the area.

And through it all, residents have to use whatever information they can get as they choose whether to stay or leave and whether to sue or reach a settlement with the company linked to the sinkhole's formation.

"I'm just waiting on the lawyers," said Amy Duplessis, a Bayou Corne homeowner who waits on tables at Landry's Seafood in nearby Pierre Part. "I've been to all the meetings. You hear the same things over and over again.

"I understand your frustration," geologist Gary Hecht told insurgents last week at one of the regular town meetings held to update residents. "I wish I had better answers. ... We're in for a long haul."

'The swamp's gone'

The sinkhole formed near the Oxy Geosim No. 3 cavern, which is close to the western edge of the Napoleonville Salt Dome. Injunctive action of the cavern is owned by Bayou Corne, Bayou Grand and La. 70.

Between 1982 and 2010, Texas Brine Corp. injected water into the cavern and extracted salt-saturated brine for use in the production of magnesium. Then Oxy Geosim No. 3 was capped. Texas Brine continued to extract brine from other caverns nearby.

At some point, experts believe, part of the western wall of the Oxy Geosim No. 3 cavern, somewhere between 3,400 feet and a mile deep, either collapsed or was breached, said Texas Brine spokesman Sonny Cranch. The exact cause remains unknown.

The first signs of trouble came in May 2012, when people noticed gas bubbling to the surface of water in that area.

Lary said pipelines run through the area, so the pipeline companies were notified. But they couldn't find any leaks.

Then, on Aug. 3, 2012, residents awoke to find that an acre of ground had given way.

"Employees showed up for work," said Cranch. "They went out and said, 'The swamp's gone.'"

Duplessis recalled that morning, too.

"We had helicopters that day and the news," Duplessis said. "There was a strong smell of diesel, and every once in a while you'd feel a shaking.

Workers dig a well Wednesday near the Assumption Parish sinkhole. The well will be used to test water.

But the shaking was going on long before we had the sinkhole." Landry said he saw people rushing around the command post that emergency preparedness officials had set up near the entrance to his subdivision after the gas bubbles emerged.

"There was a bad smell in the area, a fuel smell, like a diesel or a crude oil smell," Landry said. "Everybody was pretty excited because nobody knew at the time how big the sinkhole had appeared. What had caused it or just how much bigger it would get.

"So it was a game changer, the day the sinkhole appeared. Aug. 3." Landry remembered that first night, when he and his wife heard helicopters flying in the darkness. He said the helicopters were keeping watch on the sinkhole, ready to warn homeowners if any of their houses were threatened.

Growing worries

The sinkhole has continued to expand, growing from that single acre on that first day to about 25 acres.

A recent video clip from the Assumption Parish Office of Emergency Preparedness went viral on YouTube. It showed the northeast edge of the sinkhole expanding to swallow cypress trees, a process that has become known locally as "sloughing in."

Sonny Cranch, spokesperson for Texas Brine Corp., takes a reporter on a tour of the berm surrounding the 25-acre Assumption Parish sinkhole near Bayou Corne.

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