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### Neighbors oppose Central Louisiana burn pit permit renewal

Company wants to build closed facility to handle more hazardous waste

By: Frances Madeson

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**COLFAX** – Neighbors of a Grant Parish hazardous waste disposal facility are fighting the renewal of its state operating permit. They say Clean Harbors Colfax has faced few repercussions for serious past violations at its burn pit, and they fear the continued open burning of materials there will lead to further groundwater and soil contamination and health problems for people who live as far as 10 miles away.

John Munsen Jr., who lives near the facility, believes the original permit was illegally issued to Clean Harbors and should be canceled altogether. At a community hearing Thursday, he said the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality (LDEQ) didn't follow a "five-step inquiry" a court ruling says is required when it first issued the permit, and it still isn't following it now.

"If y'all had followed the law, y'all would never have issued an open-burn, open-detonation permit for that facility," Munsen said. "Y'all have a duty of the public trust to do all you can to protect the environment, and you have not. Y'all have actually worsened the environment up here by granting the permit."

Munsen was one of more than two dozen people who expressed opposition to the permit renewal at a public hearing the LDEQ hosted Thursday at the Grant Parish Civic Center. The agency is accepting public comments on the Clean Harbors renewal request until Jan. 13.

Residents who went to the microphone talked about their cancers, thyroid and respiratory ailments, skin rashes, sores, severe hair loss and children with chronic sinus infections. Military veterans said their post-traumatic stress disorder is triggered by the loud detonations that are part of the open-burn process. Sliska Larry, who lives within 2 miles of the burn pit, referred to the explosions as "the bombing."

The closest residential area to the facility, a neighborhood known as The Rock, is a five-minute walk away.

"I want to see my grandchildren grow up and my great grandchildren," Larry said. "After a while, we aren't going to have a town for our children to grow up in... I wish somebody would do something."

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### **What and how materials are disposed of**

At the 700-acre facility 5 miles north of Colfax, technicians wear hazmat suits with protective gear over their ears to blow up and burn materials. According to a hearing notice published in the Dec. 8 edition of The Chronicle, a weekly newspaper in Colfax, items disposed of at Clean Harbors include military grade ammunition, fireworks, explosives, rocket fuel, auto airbags and rocket motors.

The materials are trucked in, placed on trays on concrete pads, doused with accelerants and ignited, according to Wilma Subra, a chemist with the Louisiana Environmental Action Network (LEAN). Open burns spew thick plumes of black smoke, which scientists keeping tabs on the site say contain harmful heavy metals.

Since the LSU Superfund Research Program began air monitoring in March, particulate matter containing heavy metals traceable to Clean Harbors' emissions has been trapped in filters almost 10 miles away from the open burn site.

According to a summary of the renewal permit LEAN distributed at a Colfax community meeting two days before the LDEQ hearing, the current permit allows Clean Harbor to burn and detonate materials for eight daylight hours, five days a week. Under the renewed permit, the Massachusetts-based company would have two years to build a contained burn chamber system that could break down reactive, ignitable and explosive waste.

Once completed, the contained burn system will be allowed to operate around the clock 365 days a year. It will be permitted to burn 410 pounds of material per hour, not to exceed around 280 tons per calendar year.

A number of speakers at the LDEQ hearing objected to a proposed provision that would allow Clean Harbors to open burn if its closed-burn unit needed to be shut down for a malfunction or maintenance. Devin Lowell of the Tulane Environmental Law Clinic took issue with an exception that allows for open burning of new waste streams on a case-by-case basis with LDEQ approval.

Even with a fully operational closed system, KALB reported Clean Harbors will still be allowed to open burn 10% of the waste it handles.

Neighbors said they fear increased traffic, with trucks carrying highly combustible waste materials, will greatly heighten the risk of accidents that could involve explosions, chemical burns or radiation poisoning.

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Tulane clinic lawyers say the expansion of the Clean Harbors permit is illegal under the federal Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA). Lowell explained the act bans open burning and detonation of hazardous waste unless it is shown the waste cannot be safely treated through any other means.

‘Here, both LDEQ and Clean Harbors have admitted that there is a safe alternative to open burning for the vast majority of waste that Clean Harbors treats – the closed burning system that was proposed in this permit,’ Lowell said.

### **Neighbors air toxic concerns**

William Bynog, a geologist and part-time Colfax resident, and engineer John Richardson, who lives there year-round, warned that granting Clean Harbors’ permit renewal would extend too many loopholes to a bad corporate citizen that has faced a few repercussions for serious past violations.

Most recently, LDEW records show Clean Harbors paid a \$650,000 fine in September for repeat air quality violations in 2020. Over a two-week span, the Colfax facility exceeded a 45-minute time limit on smoldering open burns nine times.

Subra, with LEAN, said residents have lodged more than 1,500 formal complaints with LDEQ against Clean Harbors since September 2017. The most common were offsite plumes, falling ash, chemical odors and loud explosions that rattle their homes and shake their foundations.

“In order to protect the health of all the community members and aquatic and terrestrial populations of flora and fauna in Grant Parish, all open burn, open detonation hazardous waste must cease, and the toxic emissions to be released by the contained burn chamber must be totally scrubbed to zero,” Subra said.

Academic researcher Dr. Jennifer Richmond-Bryant, an expert on pollution’s effects on people, explained at the hearing that the LSU Superfund Research Program has conducted a community health survey near the Clean Harbors facility. Heavy metals found in particulate matter samples at 10 monitoring sites spaced out 2 miles from the open burn pit correlate to specific diseases residents detailed in the survey. They might also contribute to high mortality rates among those residents than Louisianians generally, she said.

“We’ve picked up iron, aluminum, magnesium, zinc, manganese, which causes neurological issues, chromium, which we know causes cancer,” Richmond-Bryant said. “Copper, barium, antimony, nickel, which we know causes skin irritation, vanadium and

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cobalt. A lot of these compounds cause respiratory ailments, They cause irritation, neurologic diseases, cardiovascular disease, anemia. A lot of the things that we're hearing from the community members jive with what we're finding."

Rapides Parish pathologist Dr. Stephen Norman shared findings from his work over the past 10 years in the region at the LDEQ public hearing.

"I have held these lungs in my hands," Norman said, "I have dissected these lungs, and I've looked at them under the microscope, and I can tell you that the lungs of Grant Parish citizens are less healthy than the others in Central Louisiana. This is personal observation and unpublished, but it's the truth."

Clean Harbors' spokesperson did not respond to multiple calls to its Massachusetts corporate headquarters seeking comment for this story.

### **Honoré calls out LDEQ secretary**

Retired U.S. Army Lt. Gen Russel Honoré, now an environmental activist, traveled to Colfax for the LDEQ hearing. He told attendees Louisiana is the only state that allows commercial open-air detonation and burning of hazardous materials.

"They come to Louisiana because we're the dumping ground," Honoré said. He called out LDEQ Secretary Dr. Chuck Carr Brown for not implementing promised safety protocols, and the Louisiana Department of Health for not protecting the public.

"Last month [Brown] told me that he would establish a procedure that would notify people in Colfax by phone before a burn is going to take place. Has anyone been told anything? That was a lie," Honoré said. "He also told me they will inform the people the direction the wind was blowing so they could protect themselves ... that was a lie. Has the Department of Health been here? No."

In response to questions about Honoré's remarks, LDEQ spokesman Greg Langley told the Illuminator via email the department "understands Gen. Honoré's concerns, but her is mischaracterizing his conversation with the secretary. The Clean Harbors permit application is still being processed, and the agency will not comment further until a final decision is reached and made public."

Brenda Vallee of the Central Louisiana Coalition for a Clean and Healthy Environment, a grassroots group formed in 2015 to oppose open burning, told the Illuminator the Louisiana Department of Health (LDH) met with them and LDEQ in 2016 and 2017, but they haven't seen them since.

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“If they’ve come in, they’ve snuck in,” said Vallee.

Dr. David Holcombe, the top LDH official in Central Louisiana, told the Illuminator the state health department doesn’t really play a direct role with DEQ permit reviews. Relevant data comes from its community health assessments and statistics it collects for the state’s cancer registry.

“What’s interesting is the [Congress] just passed legislation to offer compensation [through the VA] to the thousands of soldiers involved in open pit burning in Iraq,” Holcombe said.

The action from Congress is recognition that burn pits have “health consequences, and it wasn’t a good thing to do. They are accepting responsibility for that. This is my personal opinion, but I don’t understand why this hasn’t converted over to closed burning, like a decade ago,” he said.

Holcombe said a conflicting professional engagement kept him from Thursday’s hearing, but that he would meet soon with the Central Louisiana Coalition for a Clean and Healthy Environment.

Vallee confirmed via text message to the Illuminator that a meeting with Holcombe was in the works.

Correction: This story was updated to accurately reflect the objections Tulane Law Clinic attorney Devin Lowell had with the Clean Harbors permit renewal proposal.

### Works Cited

Madeson, F. (2022, December 20). Neighbors oppose Central Louisiana burn pit permit renewal. Retrieved from Louisiana Illuminator:  
<https://lailluminator.com/2022/12/20/neighbors-oppose-central-louisiana-burn-pit-permit-renewal/>