

Unit 3: Power



Take care of us': Colfax residents plea for EPA action over Clean Harbors permit renewal

EPA details limited authority over state-issued permit

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COLFAX, La. (KALB) – On Wednesday, Jan. 11, leadership from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) toured the Town of Colfax and heard the first-hand experiences of residents in the area who vividly detailed the impacts of Clean Harbors Colfax's (CHC) operation. The EPA's involvement comes on the cusp of a possible renewal of CHC's permit.

CHC disposes of "drum and bulk hazardous waste in liquid, solid, semi-solid, sludge and gas forms." These materials include carcinogenic chemicals and explosives such as munitions, airbags and fireworks. The current disposal methods are to open burn or detonate (OB/OD) the waste by igniting it on platforms on the facility's property. The OB/OD process produces loud booming sounds and thick toxic plumes that settle over the surrounding communities.

CHC is the only OB/OD waste disposal facility in the United States, a practice which residents attest to having caused extensive negative health impacts, shift and shaking of their homes and exposure to multiple chemicals and pollutants in the air.

"This is what my hair is looking like," said Debra Clay as she removed her headscarf to reveal her hair loss. "I want people to see, so they are able to tell Clean Harbors about what has happened to me."

Clay said her "pretty" hair used to be to her chin, but the hair loss she has experienced has made her unrecognizable.

"We can't raise anything," said Clay, referring to her garden. "So, what does that tell us about what they have done for us? Really they haven't done anything but brought horror to our community. It's time out for that. They need to be out of here."

"When they start burning and when they bomb, the top of my house is shaking," said Brenda Redmon, describing the impact of operations on her two-story house.

Unit 3: Power



“Everything up there on the walls is falling off. We have mirrors that are breaking, we have pictures that are falling. Downstairs, it’s the same thing.”

“I want them gone. I don’t care about that permit, just cut back,” said Salisca Larry. “I need ‘am out of here ‘cause I want my children to live, my grandchildren, my great-grandchildren and so on. I don’t know about the rest of the community, but for me, I want them out.”

Accounts like those of Clay, Redmond, and Larry were just a few from Wednesday’s meeting and a drop in the bucket compared to more than 1,650 complaints filed against CHC since September 2017.

“There’s no substitute for being able to hear from the people who experienced the issues that sometimes polluting facilities may cause for communities, and I had an opportunity today to hear rich narratives about people’s lives and how they’ve been affected and how they’ve been impacted,” said Dr. Carlton Waterhouse, deputy assistant administrator for the EPA’s Office of Land and Emergency Management. “And the things that they want to see happen here in this community. So, I think it was a wonderful experience for me, but it was a sad experience for me as well because hearing about the struggles and challenges communities have had is something I take to heart.”

The meeting came just before the end of the public comment period on CHC’s permit renewal. The comment period ends Friday, Jan. 13.

CHC outlines a plan in its permit renewal request to construct a closed burn chamber system (CBCS) that would dispose of a majority of the waste received at the facility. CBCS units filter smoke and byproducts before being released into the atmosphere as often more than 99% clean air. Those units are the industry standard. Though, the proposal would still allow for around 10% of its waste to be disposed of via OB/OD and give CHC a two-year grace period to construct the CBCS.

It is the 10% left to be openly-burned and a years-long track record of non-compliance with the CHC’s current permit, however, that has left Colfax residents vehemently opposed and calling on the EPA for help.

“Who’s gonna make ‘em abide by that permit that they’ve got?” asked Terry Brown, a former state representative for District 22. “Who’s gonna come up here and stay with them 24/7, if they burn 24/7, to make sure they abide by that?”

Unit 3: Power



“One of the things that I think we’re trying to get at with this permit is to to make it enforceable, to make violations more easily identifiable and more easy to enforce against,” responded Melissa Smith, who presented the EPA’s comments on the permit renewal.

The EPA representatives explained that the permit as it is now written is loose and makes it difficult to show non-compliance. Instead, they can make comments on the permit renewal, detailing improvements and concerns.

As part of those improvements, the EPA noted the proposal for only 10% of waste to be OB/OD. Smith said this was due to a safe alternative found for all but one waste stream, which would still need OB/OD for disposal.

However, they noted significant concerns, including plumes, health issues, animals dying, ongoing non-compliance and potential pollution.

Some improvements noted included the need for public access to inspection records, continued monitoring of air quality and development of a community engagement plan.

However, residents reiterated they felt CHC would still not abide by a renewed permit, even with any changes or improvements.

“If we were to take over what the state is doing that would be unprecedented,” added Dr. Earthea Nance, EPA Region 6 administrator. That comment was met by an “it’s time” from one resident.

Though having the EPA on the ground touring Colfax and hearing from those impacted was a big step, the reality is that the EPA’s oversight role is limited on a state-issued permit, meaning it ultimately is in the hands of the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality.

However, being the lead actor, LDEQ Secretary Dr. Chuck Brown was not present at the meeting. News Channel 5 was told he was invited.

Many residents expressed distrust in LDEQ, referencing the multiple cases documented of CHC’s continued non-compliance over the years, even after inspection from LDEQ.

“Y’all need to do something that’s more than just check on their permit and give them lip service,” said one Pineville resident in support of those with complaints. “Y’all need to do something to make ‘em do what they’re supposed to do.”

Unit 3: Power



That resident detailed other complaints stemming from his own experience from the now-closed Dresser, Inc. plant in Tioga, which was shut down in 2017.

In 2011, a fire hydrant break led to contaminated soil and groundwater on-site and in surrounding residential areas within Rapides and Grant Parish. Residents were not notified of the spill until 2020, though LDEQ was notified of the spill in 2012.

That incident led to several years of contamination alleged in multiple class-action medical lawsuits filed against Baker Hughes, Inc., the successor-in-interest for Dresser, Inc.

Now, those impacted are looking for support even higher up than LDEQ secretary to Gov. John Bel Edwards.

“Let’s bring the governor. [Let’s have the] governor come to us,” said James W. Scarborough. “He came to us when he wanted a vote. Now, you come back to the Grant Parish community, and let’s take care of this deal.”

Works Cited

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