

The Birth of the Environmental Justice Movement Case Study Afton, North Carolina (Warren County)

After the illegal disposal Polychlorinated biphenyl (PCB) along North Carolina highways in 1978, state officials selected the predominately Black community of Afton for a landfill despite the site's incompatibility with Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) guidelines. Community residents fought the initial placement of the landfill, often placing themselves in harm's way by physically blocking trucks. Over twenty years after the landfill was constructed, persistent activism by community residents caused the state to complete on-site decontamination of the PCB-contaminated soil. Warren County is widely recognized as the birthplace of the environmental justice movement.

Warren County was selected in 1979 to be the disposal site for the PCB-contaminated soil. According to the 1980 U.S. Census, the population of Warren County was estimated to be 16, 232 and 60% Black. State officials denied that the racial makeup of Warren County influenced the decision to place the landfill in Afton. Warren County has been labeled as "the poorest county in North Carolina" ranking 97th of 100 counties with most residents living in poverty. In an effort to address the economic depression of the county, officials attempted to attract development investor to create jobs and help to finance a water/sewer infrastructure. The county failed to attract developers to build housing and commercial space because of the county's plan to build a nearby landfill. Many residents worried that in the future Warren County would only be attractive to hazardous waste industries.

Opposition to the landfill created a foundation for voter registration efforts, which in 1982 resulted in Warren County being the first county in North Carolina to have a majority of Black members on the Board of County Commissioners. Though opposition did not succeed in barring the landfill construction, the opposition did have a positive effect on the political power of Black residents in Warren County.

PCB is a chemical used in coolants and lubricants of transformers. Research into possible health consequences of this chemical began in 1968 after a spill in Japan contaminated rice. Studies completed in 1975 found communities exposed to it had elevated stomach and liver cancer rates. The effects can cause neurological, stomach, liver, and reproductive disorders.

During the four-year period of discovery and landfill interment (1978-1982) the contaminated soil remained along roadsides with potential health consequences to those living near the sites.

Excerpt from Real People – Real Stories: Afton, NW (Warren County). This excerpt was taken from 2008 The Exchange Project Report on Warren County. The Project is located at The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. For more detailed information visit <http://www.ExchangeProject.unc.edu>.

Krysan, Maria. 2002. "Data Update to *Racial Attitudes in America*." An update and website to complement *Racial Attitudes in America: Trends and Interpretations, Revised Edition*, Howard Schuman, Charlotte Steeh, Lawrence Bobo, and Maria Krysan, 1997, Harvard University Press.
<http://tigger.uic.edu/~krysan/racialattitudes.htm>.