

The Associated Press State & Local Wire

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HEADLINE: Along Louisiana's refinery row, frustrated neighbors launch a grassroots movement to get out

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DATELINE: NEW SARPY, La.

BODY:

American flags flutter above mowed lawns. Freight trains rumble through, whistle, and kids play in back yards. In the evenings, frogs jump under porch lights.

New Sarpy is a neighborly place. As perfect a spot as any to call home, if it weren't for the oil refinery. For more than 20 years, the Orion Refining Corp. plant has inched closer and closer to the modest homes and trailers here like, the locals say, a "land shark." Oil men bought the school. Bulldozers razed the woods.

In their place came huge tanks that seemingly rise from the doorsteps, gigantic flares that burn through the night, soot that coats the shrubbery and the constant, stifling scent of benzene.

"I was looking for peace and harmony," grumbled Harlon Rushing, who moved his family to a trailer home here in 1966. "I found it until they started blowing me out of bed."

Many in this Mississippi River town of 1,500 about 25 miles west of New Orleans have had enough, and it has become the latest to launch a grassroots campaign to have the refinery buy them out and move them out.

Orion officials are adamant: the refinery is clean, friendly and a good neighbor.

"Orion has state-of-the-art refining and emissions technology," said company spokeswoman Joy Patin.

But Orion is trapped in a groundswell of environmental activism moving through a line of Mississippi River refinery towns.

Shell Oil Corp.'s July offer to buy homes in nearby Norco for at least \$80,000 has become a rallying cry for people in Garyville, Alsen, Reserve, Plaquemine, Chalmette and Geismar.

"There's always been anger, but I think communities are becoming more educated," said environmental activist Wilma Subra. "When they see one community get relocated it gives them the strength to try to do the same."

Tulane University's Environmental Law Clinic filed a Clean Air Act lawsuit against Orion in January on behalf of the Concerned Citizens of New Sarpy, the group that has organized to seek the buyout.

"We don't want a million dollars from Orion," said 73-year-old resident Ida Mitchell. "What we want is what everyone wants - their God-given right to live in their homes without all these chemicals in the air."

Residents say they were terrified last year when an Orion tank caught fire and burned for 14 hours. But it's the everyday odors that drive some to distraction.

For Dorothy Jenkins, 61, the wafts of benzene forced her to abandon outside work on her cabbage, okra and mustard greens garden. She blames a stroke and bypass heart surgery on the fumes.

"Sometimes it was so bad around here I had to put my head in the refrigerator to breathe," Perkins said.

For the past 15 years, environmentalists have labeled this industrial corridor "Cancer Alley," citing numerous health problems including a large number of stillbirths in one community. But federal and state agencies investigated and found no link between health problems and the petrochemical industry.

Health problems, however, were linked to poverty by a number of studies - a lack of primary health care and lifestyles, including diet and tobacco.

Still, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency cited Orion earlier this summer for numerous violations.

Between March 1999 and February 2001, the plant reported 82 flaring incidents, an "excessive" amount for EPA. A plant burns off sulfur dioxide in its flares when there's a malfunction to avoid explosions. According to EPA, Orion released 772 tons of sulfur into the air during that period.

The agency also found that Orion failed to test its equipment and failed to contain benzene vapors in its waste water facility.

Last year, Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality inspectors came up with

more, including missing inspection records, unreported discharges of polluted water and faulty pollution sampling.

"They have their P.R. people out saying how it's all fine," said Anne Rolfes, executive director of the Louisiana **Bucket Brigade**, a group working to build grassroots environmental activism. "You don't get any dirtier than Orion."

Orion's argument against a buyout is that New Sarpy is three-quarters of a mile from processing units. In Norco, homes were as close as 150 feet.

Instead, Orion recently came up with a "Community Improvement Initiative."

Effective Dec. 1, the company is offering a \$25,000 loan, forgivable after five years, to the closest owner-occupied houses - or roughly 155 people.

Under "Option B," renters and owners would receive \$15,000 - \$3,000 a year for five years - to do with as they please.

The compromise: Take the money and drop the lawsuit.

"We are hearing more and more that residents want to take in the plans and drop the lawsuit," said Orion's Patin. "We want the community to stay intact and improve."

Rolfes called Orion's offer "a threat and ultimatum."

"They're working really hard to divide the community," Rolfes said.

Patin said the rift between the community and the refinery is based on misunderstanding.

"It begins with educating them and providing them with information," Patin said. "Just to look at those big structures - it can be scary. I feel that we alleviate some of their fears by educating them. When you see the white puffs coming out of the stacks, that's steam. It's not like it's pumping out pollution."

But longtime resident Rushing doesn't need educating: He's read just about every permit, violation notice, news article and public document on Orion.

"All they look for is the dollar sign, the almighty dollar," Rushing said. "It a matter of big money people taking advantage of little money people, that's all it is."

On The Net:

Orion Refining Corp.: <http://www.orionrefining.com/>

Louisiana **Bucket Brigade**: <http://www.labucketbrigade.org/>

Tulane University Environmental Law Clinic: <http://www.tulane.edu/telc/index.html>

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