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HEADLINE: Louisiana residents want oil giant to buy out homes

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BODY:

People living in the shadow of a Louisiana oil refinery told the Environmental Protection Agency on Thursday they want the owner to relocate them.

"When I'm in my yard, I can smell it and it gives me palpitations," said Hazel Davis, 70, who has lived for nearly 30 years next to the Shell refinery _ now called the Motiva Norco Refinery/Shell Chemical Plant "They need to get us out."

Motiva/Shell has two facilities that surround Norco, a small community 40 miles northwest of New Orleans. About a dozen residents made their case to the EPA's National Advisory Council for Environmental Policy and Technology in a public hearing here.

Motiva/Shell was named one of the worst polluters in the nation in a recent report from the Environmental Defense Fund. It releases more cancer-causing toxins than any other refinery in the state.

The refinery has a bad record on accidents and spills. Although most incidents are small, two stand out in the memory of residents. In 1973, a pipeline erupted and killed two residents, and in 1989, an explosion killed seven workers and injured nearby residents.

Residents closest to the refinery _ mostly blacks who have lived there for decades _ report a wide range of health problems ranging from asthma to cancer.

"The citizens of Norco want out," said Anne Rolfes, who is coordinating a grass-roots effort, called the **Bucket Brigade**, in which residents test air quality around the plant. "On an average day, there are nine harmful chemicals in the air. They are at low levels which Shell says won't hurt anyone, but we say, over years, they've got to have an effect."

The EPA cannot force the refinery to relocate residents, but it can step up its oversight, something normally handled primarily by the state Department of Environmental Quality.

The EPA recently conducted extensive tests at the facility. The results have not yet been published.

The EPA and DEQ have sponsored a pilot program with Motiva/Shell to help the company improve its relationship with the community. Thursday's public comment session was part of that program.

Shell has a policy of buying out anyone who lives along the fence line of its facilities at "fair market price," said T. Allen Kirkley, the refinery manager. But Norco residents say the market price of a home sitting across from a refinery wouldn't cover the cost of a comparable home elsewhere. They want the company to relocate the community as a group and give them homes in exchange for their Norco homes. There are about 75 families who want relocation.

Kirkley said that's out of the question.

"We have more residents that want to stay than want to leave," he said at a news conference held immediately after the Norco citizens talked to reporters. He said his company has taken surveys and most of the 4,000 residents like having Motiva/Shell for the jobs it brings. In fact, a new subdivision is being developed on one side of the refinery, he said.

Kirkley also denied that Motiva/Shell is one of the worst polluters in the nation _ or even in the state.

"The Environmental Defense Fund misrepresented us," he said. "We are not the worst. We are not the best, but our numbers show us as being a midrange refinery in terms of toxic emissions."

He did not deny that the refinery releases chemicals into the air, but he said those emissions were at safe levels.

"Norco is a very safe place to live, in my opinion," said Kirkley, who lives in a New Orleans suburb about 20 miles away.

Norco sits on the Mississippi River in a region between New Orleans and Baton Rouge dubbed "Cancer Alley" by environmentalists because of the number of petrochemical companies there.

Some of the Norco residents complaining about the Motiva/Shell refinery live with 20 feet of the fence line.

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