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SMOKY VIEW: Clara Smith used to live near an oil refinery in Norco, La. The Bucket Brigade helped residents prove it was polluting, and the refinery agreed to a buyout.
LES STONE/ZUMA PRESS/FILE

To clean the air, communities grab a bucket

By **Eliza Strickland** | Contributor to *The Christian Science Monitor*

For people living near oil refineries or industrial plants, the signs can be obvious: strange odors, particles clouding up windows, and high rates of respiratory illness. But residents have a tough time getting industry - or even government - to do anything.

So that is why they're turning to an unlikely solution: a five-gallon bucket equipped with a sturdy plastic bag and a hand-held vacuum pump. The items are the basis of a simple air-sampling device that is, increasingly, empowering communities from Norco, La., to Cuddalore, India.

Residents take air samples with a bucket provided by an international environmental group called the Bucket Brigade, then have it analyzed at a lab. Results arrive a few weeks later. Armed with hard data, community activists can more easily educate the public and lobby industries and governments to make improvements.

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The goal of the Brigade "is to get the polluting companies to clean up or shut down," says Denny Larson, developer of the Bucket Brigade concept.

The test results put a facility in an awkward position, he adds. "Just by introducing that very scientific piece of data, facilities and agencies are now in the position where the only way to refute that data is to actually take a test, too."

The Bucket Brigade was launched in 1995 in San Francisco and recently branched out overseas in places like South Africa, England, and the Philippines. The decentralized organization is affiliated with the Global Community Monitor, an environmental group based in San Francisco. Larson and his colleagues train community activists, who learn to partner with local groups that have the money and know-how to continue sustaining their efforts.

The newest Brigade division abroad, in Cuddalore, started up just weeks ago. After a few days of basic training, the residents of this agricultural and fishing village got to work. They had long worried about the effects of pollution from nearby chemical plants. They took air samples, and the results provided them with their first proof that the plants were indeed poisoning the air.

"It's a pretty bad situation over there," says Mr. Larson, also director of Global Community Monitor. "The results were orders of magnitude worse than we've ever collected, even, say, in Africa. These had 10 and 100 times higher levels of chemicals than we'd ever found in the air before."

With their new data, community activists plan to begin educating the public and lobbying for changes.

They hope India will benefit, just as the community of Norco did a few years ago. Residents who lived between the Motiva oil refinery, owned by Shell, and a Shell chemical plant had been complaining about air quality and asking for a property buyout since an explosion in the neighborhood killed two people in 1973.

"It just fell on deaf ears," says Iris Carter, a former resident of Norco.

Refinery representatives not only refused to consider buying the properties, she says, they also said there was no need to set up air monitors to check claims of hazardous chemicals in the air.

This is typical behavior, says Anne Rolfes, director of the Louisiana Bucket Brigade. "Everywhere in the US and certainly other countries,

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there is a willful lack of information about what is in these communities," she says. "Why? Because [the industries] don't want to know."

When Norco residents began working with the Brigade in 1998, they gathered evidence about their air that the facilities had refused to provide. Having hard data not only boosted their bargaining position, it also gave them confidence when confronting refinery officials.

"It changes a very vague complaint, like 'It smelled bad last week,' to 'You violated the state benzene standard.' That's the beauty of it," Ms. Rolfes says.

In 2002 the refinery agreed to buy out the four streets of fence-line properties and gave families money to relocate.

"I don't think we'd have gotten out of there if we hadn't had proof from the buckets," resident Ms. Carter says. "When we had scientific evidence, we could say, 'You did release this stuff.' It was in their face! So they had to make some kind of concession."

Shell Chemical did not want to comment on the Norco case, and an official of the National Petrochemical & Refiners Association was not familiar with the Bucket Brigade. But at least one oil and gas association has worked with the organization to try to curtail pollution.

"It's not always an antagonistic relationship," says Larry Wall, public relations coordinator for the Louisiana Mid-Continent Oil and Gas Association. "The industry has worked with the Bucket Brigade in Norco and New Sarpy [La.] to find solutions that are acceptable to the community. I think more is accomplished through discussion and debate than through their air-sampling devices."

But he adds, "I don't know how accurate the samples are. They're not using the most sophisticated equipment, so I do have some concerns about that."

The buckets have been evaluated by the Environmental Protection Agency and found to take reliable air samples. And their discovery of high levels of dangerous pollutants in the air and the ensuing media attention have served as red flags to state agencies.

The Brigades' work has convinced environmental agencies in Louisiana and California to take a closer look at certain facilities.

In New Sarpy, for instance, a refinery was slapped with a \$1 million fine in 2002 shortly after a community group began publicizing the results from their bucket samples.

The Brigade faces different challenges in developing countries, however, where environmental regulations are typically in their infancy.

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In South Durban, South Africa, citizens who lived near several oil refineries, including the SAPREF Refinery owned by Shell and BP and the Engen Refinery, now a subsidiary of the Malaysian Petronas company, found that the industry was governed by vague guidelines.

When the group began testing in 2000, they couldn't catch refineries breaking any laws, Larson recalls. The activists agreed the plants were within the guidelines, but claimed that emissions were still causing human harm.

The South Durban citizens' group pushed for enforceable regulations so persistently that it is now involved in drafting the Air Quality Bill being considered by South Africa's Parliament. The refineries also have agreed to reduce emissions as part of the resolution.

As news of the practical, easy-to-use bucket spreads, Larson hopes there will be more requests for help from around the world.

"We want to put the tools in the hands of the affected population, and have them really in the driver's seat," he says. "A lot more people will get involved in environmental campaigns just because it's a hands-on tool. It's different from trying to get people to come to a meeting to learn about air-pollution regulation 101."

And once more of the buckets are out there, he hopes the findings will have a snowball effect.

"Just from the introduction of a little bit of data," more residents will be able to confront industrial plants with their concerns, Larson says.


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