

A Long Road to WIN Environmental Justice

The Warren County PCB Landfill

1978 to 2003



In the summer of 1978, Raleigh company Ward Transformer illegally dumped 30,000 gallons of highly toxic PCB-laced oil along 240 miles of North Carolina roadsides in 14 counties. Governor Jim Hunt's administration soon chose a 75% minority community, in one of the state's poorest counties, to bury the chemical waste (although none had been sprayed on Warren County roads). The federal government waived two regulations that would have prevented the landfill. After three lawsuits and a series of hearings, citizens in Warren County drew weeks of national attention in 1982 by peacefully but assertively resisting state efforts to bring over 7,200 truckloads of the hazardous waste into their community. Although the infamous PCB Landfill was built and capped, a renewed struggle during the 1990s forced the State to decontaminate the failing dump by 2003.



Protests were held every day for six weeks in the fall of 1982, with hundreds gathering at the Coley Springs Baptist Church and marching to the dump site to block the trucks. Nationally known preachers, plus civil rights and environmental leaders sometimes joined the struggle, linking racial and environmental issues to human and civil rights. But the organizing energy and leadership was rooted in Warren County. There were 523 arrests; some went to jail up to six times. With the nation's eyes on him, Governor Hunt forced the dump's completion, but promised to detoxify the site when technology to do so became "feasible." The legislature backed his promise.

During the 1980s, the notorious dump became a blight on the county, depressing economic development and the spirits of Afton community residents. By 1993, state monitoring showed the "Cadillac of Landfills" was failing. Hunt, back in office for two more terms, created a Citizen/State Working Group, and high level state officials proposed to remove the million gallons of contaminated water trapped inside. The citizens and their environmental allies said "No. The technologies are now available to clean up the site. Governor Hunt, keep your promise!"



From 1993 to 1999, there was an intense struggle within the working group due to years of mistrust of the State, along with what seemed to be stalling tactics as the failing site was studied, science advisors were hired and fired, and clean-up technologies were assessed. Increasingly, the question became: Could citizens persuade the state to spend the millions needed to fulfill its promise? Or would Hunt risk national media attention and renewed civil disobedience? State officials who traveled monthly to Warren County for intense four-hour working group meetings were relieved in 1999 when they were, it seemed, instructed by Hunt to genuinely pursue the clean-up.

Tensions began to ease as the governor met with citizen leaders and their allies, then helped convince the legislature to fund the decontamination, in phases, totaling \$18 million. Contractors were assessed and hired, and in 2001 the clean-up finally began. As with any large, complex project, problems developed, but were worked through and resolved by the Working Group and state contractors. Gradually, citizens and state officials cooperated to complete, in late 2003, a very long, difficult effort to remedy the State's offense against Warren County. In Spring 2004, the site will be rededicated as a memorial to environmental justice.



NC WARN is honored to have worked for the past ten years with many fine, dedicated Warren County residents, the NC Environmental Justice Network, and members of state government.