

Originally Published in St. Louis Post-Dispatch
Friday, September 19, 1996

Scandal And Deceit In Dioxin Cleanup

By Steve Taylor

Citizens at odds with the Times Beach incineration policy were recently informed that EPA administrator Carol Browner had removed herself from the Missouri dioxin cleanup. Browner removed herself because her sister, Michelle Browner, is employed by the company responsible for the Times Beach cleanup.

This maneuver places politics over public health. Citizen appeal to the Environmental Protection Agency have been severely restricted for reasons incompatible with the responsibility of safeguarding public health and the environment. Yet, the management of the eastern Missouri dioxin sites and the Times Beach incinerator by federal and state agencies has been embroiled for Day One.

Shortly after the Times Beach story began to unfold, several EPA officials alleged that authorities did not take action or inform citizens until almost a decade after state and federal authorities were well aware of the contamination. The debate culminated in the controversial replacement of Dan Harris, EPA's regional dioxin coordinator. Harris, who was responsible for initiating the dioxin investigation in the 1980s, stated to the *Post-Dispatch* at the time, "I got the feeling that they [EPA] were trying to bury the whole investigation."

In 1982, as flood waters forced the evacuation of dioxin-contaminated Times Beach, Congress investigated the negligence of EPA and Centers for Disease Control in responding to dioxin contamination in eastern Missouri. President Ronald Reagan ordered EPA administrator Ann Gorsuch to withhold documents under "executive privilege." Rita Lavelle, head of the hazardous program, began to shred documents.

Gorsuch was forced to resign along with 19 other appointees, and Lavelle served six months in jail for perjury and obstruction of justice in an investigation into political use of waste cleanup funds. Pollutant data from many of the Missouri sites remain "lost" according to the EPA.

In 1990, a report by the Committee on Government Operations, "The Agent Orange Coverup," was submitted to Congress. It said: "The Centers for Disease Control study [of exposed veterans] was controlled and obstructed by the White House because the Reagan Administration had adopted a legal strategy of refusing liability in military and civilian cases of contamination involving toxic chemicals and nuclear radiation."

Some Missouri dioxin contamination resulted from Agent Orange production. The CDC study was investigating the health effects of Agent Orange on Vietnam veterans, in particular the toxic

effects of dioxin in the herbicide. This year, President Bill Clinton signed a bill expanding compensation to veterans and their children for debilitating effects of exposure to Agent Orange. To date, there has been no compensation to citizens exposed to the same chemicals as a result of improper disposal of dioxin in Missouri.

In 1990, metaTrace, a St. Louis-based analytical laboratory in Earth City, was suspended from EPA contracts. The regional EPA official's request for suspension cited many violations including charges that metaTrace "had falsified and fraudulently submitted computer generated pesticide/polychlorinated biphenyls (PCB) test data." The request also said, "EPA has made policy decisions that are potentially life threatening relying on this invalid data."

MetaTrace handled large contracts for work at Times Beach and Weldon Spring, including a dioxin analysis designed specifically for Times Beach. Two former executive vice presidents eventually pleaded guilty; one was sentenced to five years in prison.

On May 2, 1995, a researcher funded by the Agency for Toxic Substance and Disease Registry testified to the St. Louis Dioxin Monitoring Committee that blood levels had decreased in citizens living next to an incinerator in Arkansas. The researcher, Morris Cramner, reversed his findings after the federally funded report's data were obtained by Greenpeace. In 1988, a federal court had found Cranmer guilty of defrauding the Farmers Home Administration of nearly \$10 million.

This August, the EPA met with Missouri citizens to hear evidence that a laboratory owned by the same company that operates the incinerator held for more than a week samples from sensitive trial burns. The samples were later analyzed to determine if the incinerator was performing within EPA guidelines. The laboratory, Quantera, was 50 percent owned by International Technologies, the owner of the Times Beach incinerator. International Technologies formed Quanterra several years after acquiring metaTrace. MetaTrace was suspended from EPA contracts in 1990. The location and phone number, along with some equipment and employees are the same as metaTrace's. The Department of Natural Resources is investigating a possible conflict of interest.

If all goes as planned, Times Beach will soon be a park with the ash from 27 eastern Missouri dioxin sites buried along the Meramec River. State and federal authorities hope that a blood study soon to be released will allay the concerns of those living near the incinerator. They hope that past indiscretions will be forgotten. But for many of us who have lived through the Times Beach saga, we will know that among the toxic ash is buried the integrity of officials and agencies that the public had entrusted to safeguard our health and environment.

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