

## PCB Protests <sup>[1]</sup>

### PCB Protests

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<https://www.dncr.nc.gov/about-us/history/division-historical-resources/nc-highway-historical-marker-program> <sup>[2]</sup>

*Toxic waste illegally dumped along N.C. roads was moved to landfill 2 mi. E., 1982. Protests sparked environmental justice movement in U.S.*

In the summer of 1978, Ward Transformer Company paid a trucking company to drive along rural North Carolina roads at night to discharge liquid contaminated with PCBs (polychlorinated biphenyls) onto the shoulders of roads. The deception, a violation of the Toxic Substance Control Act, contaminated soil along 240 miles of roads in 14 counties.

In December 1978 the state of North Carolina, responsible for the cleanup, purchased farmland from a Warren County farmer who was in financial distress. There, in the community of Afton, the state constructed a landfill to bury the toxic waste. The state found what seemed to be an expeditious solution to the problem—inexpensive land in a sparsely populated community

There were, however, issues more complicated than land prices in Afton. The water table in the vicinity was in the range of 10 feet below the surface and most people in the rural county drew drinking water from wells. The county also had the highest percentage of African American residents in the state and was one of the poorest. Civil rights activists and residents began to attend hearings about the proposed landfill, with locals forming the Warren County Citizens Concerned About PCBs.

That group along with the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and several prominent civic leaders and politicians joined together to protest the Warren County landfill, citing both better locations and better treatment options. The protesters believed that the landfill would undermine opportunities to attract new businesses and industries to the area and that the community, like others similar, lacked the power to prevent hazardous waste facilities from being placed in their neighborhoods.

Around 500 protesters were arrested during their efforts to stop the trucks from delivering the PCB-tainted soil to the landfill in September 1982. While the effort did not impede the progress of the landfill, it did mark the first time that opponents of a hazardous waste facility were detained for civil disobedience.

After several lawsuits and many public hearings, Warren County commissioners reached a compromise with the state. Governor James B. Hunt Jr. promised citizens that the landfill would not expand and that it would be detoxified when the technology became available. The demonstrations gained national attention and support, signaling a change in the way the public thought about and dealt with environmental issues. Today the landfill site has been detoxified.

The fight against the Warren County PCB landfill is widely credited as the genesis of the environmental justice movement in America. Eileen McGurty, environmental sciences professor at The Johns Hopkins University wrote, "Warren County spurred greater political debate and became a model for communities across the nation. . . . the specific circumstances of the Warren County events shaped the formation of the environmental justice movement and influenced contemporary environmentalism."

The events in Warren County in the early 1980s spurred the development of "a loose, national, multicultural coalition of such community groups to collectively speak out for environmental justice and to challenge others with similar interests to also speak out." The Warren County movement also caused a number of organizations, including the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), to examine the processes involved in selecting sites for hazardous waste facilities.

In its 1992 Environmental Equity Draft, the EPA noted that the Warren County PCB landfill protests marked "a watershed event that led to the environmental equity movement of the 1980s." Today the historical literature on the event is ever-increasing and the U.S. Department of Energy, the Department of the Interior, and the EPA maintain Environmental Justice offices.

### References:

Robert D. Bullard, *Dumping in Dixie: Race, Class, and Environmental Quality* (2000)

Eileen McGurty, *Transforming Environmentalism: Warren County, PCBs, and the Origins of Environmental Justice* (2007)

Christopher H. Foreman, *The Promise and Peril of Environmental Justice* (1998)

U. S. Dept. of Energy, Office of Legacy Management: <https://www.energy.gov/lm/environmental-justice> <sup>[3]</sup>

Our Road to Walk: Environmental Justice: Yesterday and Today.

### Additional Resources, Video and Images:

Exchange Project. "Real People - Real Stories | Afton, NC (Warrent County)." Chapel Hill: The Exchange Project, Dept. of Health Behavior and Health Educaiton, UNC-Chapel Hill, 2006. [https://exchangeproject.unc.edu/real\\_people/afton\\_overview/](https://exchangeproject.unc.edu/real_people/afton_overview/) <sup>[4]</sup> (comprehensive narrative of the illegal disposal of PCBs in Warren County in 1978 and the selection of Afton for a landfill)

Hampton, Chris. 2010. "Warren County and Environmental Justice: A Community Fighting Back." Senior Thesis, University of North Carolina at Asheville. <http://toto.lib.unca.edu> <sup>[5]</sup>

Eileen Maura McGurty. "From NIMBY to Civil Rights: The Origins of the Environmental Justice Movement." *Environmental History* 2, no. 3 (1997): 301–23. <https://doi.org/10.2307/3985352> <sup>[6]</sup>.

PBS, American Masters. "When Environmental Justice Meets Human Rights | A Fierce Green Fire." 2014. <https://youtu.be/sgVrvwmB5Mc> <sup>[7]</sup>

### Subjects:

[Civil Rights](#) <sup>[8]</sup>

[Environment](#) <sup>[9]</sup>

[Natural resources](#) <sup>[10]</sup>

[Political movements and parties](#) <sup>[11]</sup>

Public health <sup>[12]</sup>

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Warren County <sup>[14]</sup>

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