CHEMICAL CONTAMINATION
IN FENCELINE COMMUNITIES

Tallevast, Florida: Rural Residents Live Atop Groundwater Contaminated by High-Tech Weapons Company

Lynn Ward and Wanda Williams
Photo: Steve Lerner

It all started on a September morning in 2003, when a drilling crew pulled up onto Laura Ward's lawn in the tiny town of Tallevast, Florida, 38 miles south of Tampa, and started boring a hole.

Why are they driving on my lawn? Ward wondered as she sat looking out her window. Within minutes, she was out her front door and across the lawn asking the crew chief what he was doing. She learned that Lockheed Martin, the most recent owner of the high-tech weapons plant located just down the street from her home, had hired the drilling crew to determine if toxic chemicals from their facility had seeped into the shallow groundwater and spread beneath the homes of Ward and her 300 neighbors.

When she heard this, Ward felt her world shift beneath her feet. She and her neighbors depended upon shallow wells that had provided them with water for generations. The possibility that this water was poisoned was truly frightening.

"I'm angry," says Ward, who with fellow Tallevast resident Wanda Washington leads a small community organization called Family Oriented Community United and Strong (FOCUS). "I made baby formula and cooked for my family with that water for years while people at Lockheed Martin and at the county regulatory agencies knew how harmful it was." Ward, who has two children who have had "bouts with cancer," says she is also upset because she had to learn about the contamination herself.

Dr. Clifford Ward
Photo: Steve Lerner

Up until the drillers appeared on Ward's lawn, life had been relatively quiet in Tallevast, a historically African-American community. Like many of the town's other residents, Laura Ward's husband, Dr. Clifford ("Billy") Ward, the town dentist, traces his family's history on the land back to the 1890s, when the town began as a "turp camp" where freed slaves got jobs teasing the sap out of long-leaf "slash" pines and boiling it into turpentine for use in the nation's shipyards and harbors. During his youth, Dr. Ward and his father worked as migrant laborers, following the harvest from the vegetable and fruit crops of Florida up to the apple orchards of New York. Other Tallevast residents stayed closer to home, working in the orange groves, on dairy farms, and for Ringling Brothers Circus, which has its headquarters nearby.

In 1948, a small machine shop called Visioneering opened its factory across the street from the Ward home, just down the street from the town's only store and post office. Initially, residents appreciated the relatively well-paying maintenance, janitorial and machinist jobs the new plant provided. At the factory, "metals were milled, lathed, and drilled into various components. Chemicals used and wastes generated at the facility included oils, petroleum based fuels, solvents, acids and metals."[1]

A decade later, in 1958, the factory was renamed American Beryllium Company (ABC), and it began to handle larger quantities of toxic materials to make weapons. The Loral Metal Company purchased ABC in 1961 and changed the name again, to Loral American Beryllium (LAB). During the accelerating Cold War arms race, LAB worked under contract with the U.S. Department of Defense and the U.S. Department of Energy to fabricate parts for nuclear weapons, atomic reactors, and space program projects. In 1966, LAB was purchased by Lockheed Martin.[2]

A Toxic Discovery

The first report of contamination came when Lockheed Martin employees discovered that a sump pump in Building #5 had broken and spilled large quantities of industrial solvents and cancer-causing chemicals into the soil and groundwater. Among the "chemicals of concern" found in the groundwater in concentrations exceeding the Florida Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) guidelines were beryllium, chromium, tetrachloroethylene, and 1,1-dichloroethylene. Soil samples also contained excessive levels of volatile organic compounds, total petroleum hydrocarbons and other harmful compounds and metals.[3]

While company officials reported the contamination to local environmental officials at the Manatee County Environmental Management, they did not inform the people of Tallevast. That lack of candor is now part of a lawsuit. Residents did not learn they were living atop a spreading plume of toxic chemicals until three years later.

From July 2000 until October 2003, Lockheed Martin officials engaged in a quiet, voluntary clean up of some of their onsite contamination. They hired Tetra Tech, a California-based company, to remove 538 tons of tainted soils. In the course of their environmental sampling, Tetra Tech employees found trichloroethylene, tetrachloroethylene, dichloroethylene, dichloroethane, and vinyl chloride.[4] They subsequently informed state environmental officials that contaminants from the five-acre company site -- including trichloroethylene (TCE) and a number of other solvents -- were migrating offsite in the groundwater.

Had Laura Ward not demanded to know why someone was boring holes in her lawn, residents of Tallevast might still be drinking water contaminated with toxic chemicals from the Lockheed Martin plant. Instead, Ward and her friend Wanda Washington became amateur environmental investigators, traveling to county and state regulatory offices to see what they could learn about the contamination. What they discovered was that a county official had been dispatched to see if any residents in the community were using their own wells but she failed to get out of her car to check because, county records indicate, she was afraid of dogs.

State officials later conceded that the "notification provisions of our rules were not adequate" and that residents should not have had to wait three years to hear about the contamination under their homes. The Florida legislature later passed the "Tallevast

Rule," which requires regulatory officials to promptly inform affected residents when a contamination problem is discovered. This fix, however, came too late to help Tallevast residents.

Robin Darville
Photo: Steve Lerner

"This is Personal"

"This would have been handled differently in a white community," says Wanda Washington about the drinking water contamination from the Lockheed Martin plant. "I think it is because of skin color. The government needs to be schooled that it is not alright to bring these types of facilities into residential communities."

Washington, 48, a mother of three with a psychology degree who worked as a database administrator, describes herself as normally a quiet woman. But since some well water in Tallevast was found to contain 250 to 500 ppb of trichloroethylene, a known carcinogen for which the regulatory standard is 3 ppb, Washington has begun to speak out. "I'm on the frontline because this contamination affected my family. I have no choice. This story needs to be told."

"I hope God protects us and builds a fence around us," she says, but she knows that the shallow wells that residents used for decades have already brought poisons into their homes. "Even if we can't prove it scientifically, that these chemicals are causing cancer in our community, we all know it." Washington is outraged that county officials knew about the contamination for three years before residents found out about it on their own. "Who is looking out for us?" she asks. "Everybody knew except us and we are living with these poisons. I can't believe that anyone can be so cruel."

She is convinced that the pollution has already devastated the health of her family. Her mother, Lillie Flemming, 70, has breast cancer that is being treated with chemotherapy. She also has diabetes, skin growths, and a cough that doctors cannot treat effectively. "I'm upset about what is happening," says Flemming. "In fact, I'm angry as hell. I made formula out of water and fed it to my children. I had one child who died at seven months, one who was retarded and two who survived."

Washington's sister, Robin Darville, 38, also suffers from a number of ailments that could have been caused by the pollution. She had a stroke that caused memory loss so severe that at first she didn't recognize her mother or husband. "I had to learn to walk all over again," she says. Since her stroke she experiences migraines, pseudo-seizures, and difficulty grasping objects in her right hand. She has also given birth to an underweight infant.

Darville's doctors are puzzled about why she has so many health problems at such a young age. "I think it is because of the contamination," Darville says. "This is personal. Lockheed Martin should pay," Washington's uncle, who worked at the plant, is being treated for berylliosis, a rare disease caused by exposure to the heavy-metal beryllium dust used in the manufacturing of nuclear weapons.

“Tracking Household Illness”

Once news reports of the contamination began to appear, county officials were galvanized into action. They appeared in Tallevast at 8 p.m. one evening handing out five-gallon plastic bottles of water and warning residents not to drink water if it came from a well. Subsequently, all wells in town were capped and aboveground blue plastic pipes were installed as a “temporary hook-up” to county water lines. The plastic pipes remain in place today, four years later. The increase in pressure from the county water hookup caused numerous leaks in faucets and hot water heaters in Tallevast homes and the telephones of Laura Ward and Wanda Washington began ringing with requests for help with plumbing problems.

At a hastily convened town meeting at a church in Tallevast, Lockheed Martin officials assured residents that the danger from the chemicals that had invaded their drinking water was minimal at most. But Ward, Washington and other residents were not convinced; they decided to do their own informal community health survey. For help with this they turned to Helen Worthington, a retired nurse who was well-known and trusted in the community.

Helen E. Beyers Worthington married into the Beyers family, which traces its lineage back to the early days in Tallevast when workers at the “turp camp” would throw potatoes into the boiling sap, where they would instantly cook and bob to the surface covered in a glistening coat that shattered like glass when stuck with a fork.

“We come from hard-working people who sent their children to college,” says Worthington, who graduated from Texas A&M with a degree in nursing. A descendant of Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemmings, Worthington joined the Air Force, married an Air Force man and worked for 43 years as a nurse at bases around the world, including Florida, Arizona, New Hampshire, London and Guam.

When first approached about doing a health survey, Worthington was skeptical and thought that she would likely not find any problem. But after a few hours visiting with different families, she changed her mind. She told Ward, “There is something terribly wrong here.”

Sitting at a long table in the FOCUS offices across the street from Lockheed Martin, Worthington chronicled the health problems in her community, referring to her notes written in a careful, spidery script on a yellow legal pad. The heading at the top read: “Tallevast Florida: Tracking Household Illness.”

Worthington was astonished by the amount of cancer in her small community. She first visited one family and learned that four of seven brothers had died of cancer of the throat and other sites. Next door there were three men in the family with cancer of the liver; their sons were also having liver problems. In another family, she found that eight of ten children had died young of leukemia and brain, lung, and uterine cancer. “This was more than a coincidence,” she says.

On February 19, 2005, Worthington did a count of how many residents in Tallevast were living with cancer. She had to count herself as a cervical cancer survivor. Out of 87 households, Worthington found 15 had members with cancer; three of those have since died. This tally did not include those listed above who had already died of cancer or those who probably have cancer but prefer not to admit it.

“In our community, people do not like to admit that they have cancer,” she explains. “People here are very proud and do not like to talk about their problems.” As an example, she points to a young man in town with lymphoma who is living at home with his grandfather who he has chosen not to tell about his illness.

While it was not part of her survey, Worthington also noted a suspiciously high incidence of miscarriages, sterility, low birth rates, neurological disorders and retardation. Other residents have health problems that will never show up in Worthington’s study. Among them are Yvonne (Peggy) Ward’s 42 year-old son who has to sleep with an oxygen mask strapped to his face; and Theresa (Pat) Robinson who has a daughter with “breathing problems.”

“Almost every house in town has people with health problems,” Worthington says, “and it makes me angry that no one from the county or state was paying attention to them.” She thinks that the concentration of cancer – the “cancer cluster” -- she found in Tallevast deserves a more formal health study by county or state health officials. While Lockheed Martin and regulatory officials assure residents there are no health problems resulting from the contamination, she doesn’t believe them. “By the time the cleanup is finished we all will be dead. People here are frightened but they don’t know what to do. I don’t want to move because I own my home and I worked for it all my life. If I had known about the contamination earlier I would have moved. It isn’t safe to stay here because there are too many unknowns.”

Worthington’s neighbor Fred Bryant, 78, agrees. “If I were younger I’d move.” Bryant has lived in Tallevast all his life and worked as a butler. He doesn’t want to move because he loves the close ties he has with other residents. “This is a place where when you cry someone cries with you.” But he doesn’t want his grandchildren growing up on top of the contamination, which he thinks is causing illness. “You wonder who it will hit next.”

Expanding Plume

Not only did Lockheed Martin fail to inform residents promptly about the contamination, the company’s declarations about having “found the edge of the plume” and delineated the extent of the contamination can best be described as serially optimistic. With each new phase of testing, the size of the contaminated plume of groundwater has continued to expand like a drop of ink on a wet paper towel.

Helen Beyers
Photo: Steve Lerner

News about the size of the area contaminated by the Lockheed Martin facility unfolded slowly. In July 2003, state officials at Florida’s Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) approved Lockheed Martin’s Contamination Assessment Report, which indicated that most of the contamination was confined to their five-acre site with a small plume extending northeast of the facility. This assessment later proved to be inaccurate.

Donna Wright, a Brandenton Herald reporter, and Wilma Subra, a chemist who advises community residents on technical aspects of contamination problems, pieced together a timeline of events in Tallevast. According to their chronology, Lockheed officials first described the contamination as confined to the company’s property. However, the discovery of toxic chemicals

in private drinking water and irrigation wells beyond the boundaries of the plant made it clear that the problem was larger in scale. By 2003 Lockheed Martin officials informed state regulators that the plume of toxics had crossed over into the residential community and they were required to come up with a cleanup plan. By May 2003, a report produced by Tetra Tech to Florida's Department of Environmental Protection confirmed that the toxic plume had spread to a 12-acre area off site.[5] This was further confirmed in April 2004, when a sampling of water from 17 wells by state and local regulatory officials found five wells outside the established plume of contamination with elevated solvent levels.

The story about the spreading plume of toxics into the adjacent residential community broke in the Bradenton Herald on May 7, 2004. By the end of the month, state DEP and Department of Health officials discovered that the contamination was worse than initially thought.

In a report issued in July 2004, DEP officials reported that previous analysis of groundwater samples "indicated the presence of chlorinated solvents exceeding Florida Primary Drinking Water Standards (FPDWS)." Five irrigation wells and five supply wells located outside the plant property were found to be contaminated with TCE levels that exceeded state standards; arsenic was also detected in a soil sample. State officials concluded that there was a "much larger chlorinated solvent ground water plume, with significantly higher concentrations of chlorinated solvents" than had been delineated by Tetra Tech, the consultant firm hired by Lockheed Martin.[6] State officials also found evidence that soil samples in residential areas exceeded the state's Soil Cleanup Target Levels for arsenic, barium, lead, benzo(a)pyrene, benzo(a)fluoranthene and Total Recoverable Petrochemical Hydrocarbons.[7] One soil sample had 1,114 mg/kg of lead. The state standard is 400 mg/kg. Soil samples were also taken from residential properties where dirt taken from the American Beryllium Company property had been used as fill.[8]

Beatrice Zeigler
Photo: Steve Lerner

By June 10, 2004, the results of sampling of well water in residents around the plant showed 9 of 24 wells with traces of TCE. Wilma Subra reported that this sampling, paid for by local residents, revealed that two of the homes had 116 times the level of TCE considered safe. On July 23, 2004, testing samples from the plant site "reveal a reading of the solvent trichloroethylene at 10,000 times the drinking water standard." Subra believes that the toxic plume may originate from multiple sites of contamination on company property. A few weeks later, on August 21, 2004, Lockheed Martin officials released a report that, Subra wrote, showed TCE "solvent levels in water beneath the plant at nearly 12,000 times the state standard, and in nearby wells at up to 500 times the code."

A year later, in June 2005, after further test wells had been drilled, the company recalculated the contamination as covering 131 acres. Since then the estimate has risen to some 200 acres and still there are questions about outlying contaminated wells beyond this area. Recently, the Florida DEP ordered that Heidi Boothe's cattle herd,

which had been grazing on a farm near Tallevast, be tested after independent tests found the degreaser 1,4-dioxane in her well water.[9]

Using funds made available to them by Lockheed, the resident-led, grassroots group FOCUS hired an independent technical advisor, Tim Varney, who works with the Environ International Corporation in Tampa; as well as Michael A. Graves, a geologist who works for Environmental Sciences & Technologies. After sampling 35 drinking water and irrigation wells, Graves says his testing reveals a “deep diving plume” of contaminated groundwater that has not been adequately delineated and that is moving faster than previously thought. The plume reaches almost to U.S. Route 301 and may have reached the Floridian Aquifer System, which provides drinking water to the majority of people in the state.

Health Impact Controversy

While conceding that the chemicals had spread into the groundwater in the surrounding area, Lockheed Martin officials denied that there was any threat to the health of local residents. “Let me reaffirm that our company is committed to doing the right thing for the residents and has acted responsibly to uphold that commitment,” writes Kenneth H. Measley, Lockheed’s vice president of energy, environment and safety.

But Subra, who won the prestigious MacArthur “genius” prize for her work with contaminated communities, is less sanguine about the health threat posed by the Lockheed Martin plume. Residents may have been exposed to contaminants by drinking well water and by chemicals in the soil vaporizing and infiltrating into their homes, she explains.

“The contamination is under the residential area and it is at a very shallow depth. These chemicals are very toxic. These people should not be living over the groundwater plume. To have residents living on top of this plume is putting them at risk…. You have to get them out of there."[10] She continues, "This is not a small plume. It is a dangerous plume. It is very deep in some places and very shallow in other areas, and it is under a residential neighborhood. The groundwater below residential areas is less than 5 feet below the surface.”[11]

While some residents were initially hesitant to talk about their health concerns, for fear that news of the toxics problem in town would bring down property values, over time they began to speak out. By April 2006, 400 residents participated in an event organized by local activists at which a health survey was launched. State officials had declined to pay for a health study so residents organized their own and have requested that Lockheed Martin pay for it.

“Residents hope the survey will support their contention that pollution from the former weapons plant is responsible for unusually high rate of cancer, miscarriage, and other ailments in the community of 80 homes,” a local paper reports.[12] “How can you ingest this TCE without having consequences?” queries local resident Lewis Pryor, a resident who suffers from diabetes and has no history of the disease in his family.

Routes of Exposure

There are various possible routes by which residents of Tallevast might have been exposed to toxic chemicals that leaked from the Lockheed Martin site. The resulting plume of contaminated water was pumped up from the shallow aquifer and came into

the homes of Tallevast residents and out of their faucets. They drank the water, cooked with it and bathed in it. Their children played in the water from garden hoses. They used it to wash their cars and water their lawns.

Another possible route of exposure is through inhalation of toxic gasses. Lockheed Martin officials agree that VOCs in groundwater are a potential concern but they do not consider inhalation a significant exposure pathway because air concentrations are presumed to be low.

“Such a presumption is not acceptable,” observes Subra, who is asking that more vapor intrusion studies to be done in homes when water is in use. Both indoor and outdoor air samples should be taken when faucets are on in home sinks and showers; and when outside irrigation systems are active. “The site assessment failed to include information on vapor intrusion and volatile organics being transported into homes in the residential areas, churches, businesses, and the Community Center from Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs) in the shallow groundwater,” she writes. She also faults Lockheed Martin officials for their failure to review their strategy for a vapor study with members of the community. In her opinion, this is a mistake - the community should be consulted every step of the way.

Tallevast residents were also exposed to toxic chemicals in dirt that came from company grounds that was spread on the yards of some homes as “fill” when the plant was owned by the American Beryllium Company. Beverley Bradley, 52, a postal employee for 24 years who has lived across the street from the plant all her life, remembers when three truckloads of dirt from the facility were spread in her backyard. An avid gardener who likes to grow flowers and tend her orange and banana trees, Bradley has dark skin lesions on her hands, arms, and feet.

“The problem spread and has never gone away,” she says. “I think the contamination may have caused it.” Bradley has also had four miscarriages: one child was stillborn, one survived for a few hours, and only one child survived.

“As kids we played in the drainage ditches that came from the plant,” Bradley recalls. Company officials came to town offering jobs “and it was something good. Only later did we find out it was not so good. Many of us now feel betrayed and used. I’m angry. My family worked hard to own property to give me and I want to give it to my son but now, because of the contamination, we can’t even get a loan to fix up the house or build a new one. We are stuck in a bad situation with no solution. An injustice has been done and someone should pay.”

“We Did the Messy Work”

Residents and workers were also exposed to the beryllium dust. Exposure to beryllium, a heavy metal, can cause problems with the respiratory, organ and central nervous systems. According to the accounts of Tallevast residents who worked at the plant, most of them were hired for janitorial and maintenance jobs. Only a few were employed as machinists. “We did all the messy work,” says Bruce Bryant, 55, who worked at the plant for six years. The messy work involved milling large chunks of beryllium used in nuclear weapons and cleaning the beryllium dust out of the vents and the plant’s attic. “None of us knew what beryllium could do to you,” he explains. He is recovering from surgery for a cancer that has spread to his lymph nodes and bladder. “The cancer could be related to my work at the plant.”

Sitting with Bryant on folding chairs at the Mt. Tabor Missionary Baptist Church were five other former employees of the American Beryllium Company, including Anthony Smith, Walter Bryant, Norris Bryant, Errol Darville, Clarence Byers, and Morris Robinson. Two of them have cancer and one needs oxygen to help him breathe at night. A number of their co-workers already died of cancer. among them Ernest Smith, Anthony Smith's brother, who died of throat cancer at 29.

"I didn't feel great about working there but I needed the work," says Robert Smith, 78, who worked at ABC for 29 years and now has central nervous system and balance problems. None of the former workers gathered at the church are currently receiving compensation for health problems related to their work at the plant. Bryant comments, "It seems like you have to be dying to get any money."

Rev. Willie Smith
Photo: Steve Lerner

An environmental assessment of the Tallevast plant, conducted by beryllium experts in 1997, described dust residue at the plant as "one of the worst they had ever seen," Subra reports. County blood tests of 241 residents found seven people testing positive for beryllium sensitivity. These findings indicate that Tallevast residents and their families were exposed to beryllium dust, says Dr, Laurence Fuortes, an expert in the field from the University of Iowa. A later accounting of local beryllium exposure reveals that ten local workers tested positive as well as five local residents who did not work at the plant.

Some of the older surviving employees think that working at the plant was lethal for many. "Too many people I worked with are dead. A lot of young ones had nervous system disease and incurable illnesses," says Clarence Byers, 78, who worked for nine years at the plant as a machinist. One of the men who worked at the plant, who just turned 50, used to be a great catcher on a local baseball team and was and excellent athlete, Beyers recalls. "Now he is in a wheelchair because he can't walk and he can hardly talk…his words are all slurred." All the janitors Beyers worked with are now dead, he states. "It's lucky that every damn one of us is not sick."

When he worked at the plant, when machinists made a mistake working on a hunk of beryllium, they would ask a janitor to take the scrap piece and throw it into the plant pond so that no one would know they made mistake. Apparently unaware of this practice, plant officials would hold a "Fishathon" during which they stocked the pond with trout so that workers and their families could catch fish to take home to eat.

In addition to eating fish likely contaminated with beryllium and breathing in the dust that blew off the factory roof, residents were also exposed to beryllium through the dust brought home on the clothes of employees. One of those affected in this way is Beatrice Ziegler, 71, whose husband, Charlie Ziegler, worked at the plant. "He emptied the beryllium dust for 21 years and came home coughing," she recalls. "Now Charlie can't breathe good." He is undergoing surgery for berylliosis at a hospital in Oak Ridge, Tennessee. Ziegler's husband is not the only one in her home with berylliosis: both Beatrice Ziegler and her brother, who also lived in the house, have been diagnosed with the same problem. "I went to me doctor and he said: 'Beatrice, you are full up with

berylliosis and you got it from your husband.'" Ziegler says her main symptom is that she is "short of breath" and "some days I can barely walk." Her husband has an oxygen tank by his chair and his bed to help him breathe. Sleeping is hard because her husband suffers at night. "I wait to sleep because of him and if I am hurting I don't tell him," she adds. Ziegler says she and her brother are not receiving any help with their medical treatment from the plant because they never worked there.

Cleanup Plan

Plans are being made to clean up the site, a project that is expected to last over 20 years. Lockheed Martin officials hired Blasland, Bouck & Lee, Inc. to oversee its remediation plan, which is pending approval by state regulators. As a first step, explains Tina Armstrong, Lockheed's senior projct manager for the Tallevast cleanup, the company plans to install 60-gallon-a-minute "pump-and-treat" equipment that will use titanium dioxide and intense ultraviolet light to treat polluted water. The treatment system is said to be effective at destroying TCE and other industrial solvents. The groundwater will be extracted by ten wells, pumped into a 21,000-gallon tank, treated to state standards, and released into the sewer system. Blasland engineers will also search for globs of non-dissolved contaminates -- known technically as NAPLs (non-aqueous phase liquids) -- that may hinder the effectiveness of the pump-and-treat system. Once the water is cleaned to county standards it will be discharged into the county sewer system.[13] Lockheed spokesperson Gail Rymer notes that there are also plans to drill more off-site test wells to determine how far and how deep the contamination of industrial solvents has spread.[14]

But many residents are unsatisfied with the cleanup plan and want to be relocated. On January 21, 2005, Tallevast residents demanded that county officials relocate them and buy out their homes because of the contamination. Six months later, commissioners demanded that Lockheed Martin pay to relocate residents to safeguard them from health risks posed by the underground toxics plume. But since county lawyers began to fear that the county might be sued, the commissioners have not been heard from.

"It is like they took the silent pill," says Brenda Pinkney, 48, a Tallevast resident who works as a counselor at a community college. After she informed her doctor about the chemical contaminants found in her groundwater, Pinkney's doctor advised her to get out of town. "Every day it gets scarier," says Pinkney, who mysteriously lost her hair at age 48 and now wears a wig. "I am afraid Lockheed Martin will admit its mistake too late. They are just going to let us die."

Lockheed Martin officials say there is no reason to uproot the community because residents are not at risk. After having delineated the 131-acre plume with 137 monitoring wells and 468 soil samples, company officials argue that cleanup efforts should be confined to the plant property, and that soil and water samples of the plume offsite show it poses no threat to health and does not require remedial measures. Despite these assurances, State Representative Bill Galvano told county commissioners that federal, state, and county governments should come up with $20 million to move the 238 Tallevast residents near the plant to new homes.

On the legal front, lawsuits against Lockheed Martin have been consolidated under the direction of Motley Rice law firm in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina.[15] In all, 254 Tallevast residents have joined the suit. While Tallevast lawyers attempted to get the suit moved to the 12th Judicial Circuit in Manatee County, Lockheed Martin attorneys preferred to keep

the case in Tampa federal court. Company lawyers maintain that Lockheed Martin has, as Subra writes, “no responsibility for residents’ alleged property damage or illness because work performed at the plant was done for the federal government.”

David v. Goliath

Many residents in town are worried that, having taken on Lockheed Martin, which has extensive experience with surveillance, they are now being spied upon, tape recorded whenever they speak, and their cars are being followed. “It’s gotten to the point where I can’t take a shower without feeling that they are spying on me,” says Wanda Washington, vice president of the resident activist group FOCUS. Washington describes herself as having grown up as a person who always saw the best in other people. “You had to prove to me that you were evil.” But that has changed since she has been dealing with corporate and regulatory officials. “Now I keep second guessing myself,” she says about when she meets people. “Maybe I was just naïve in the past.” She is not alone in her sentiments. A number of residents I spoke with said they figured that the FOCUS offices were bugged. Some of them would address comments to unseen spies.

Such paranoia (or realism, depending on how you look at it) is understandable considering the size and expertise of Lockheed Martin. In 2004, Lockheed Martin brought in $35 billion in revenues, $17.5 billion of which came from the U.S. Department of Defense. This is the company that builds ballistic missile systems, as well as the Tomahawk, Trident, and Hellfire missiles, and “Star Wars” anti-ballistic missile systems. The company maintains the NASA shuttle and the President of the United State’s helicopter fleet; it produces systems for the F35 Joint Strike Fighter and the F-16 multi-role fighter jet, and is being paid to develop a new spy plane. Lockheed Martin also manages the information technology system for the Pentagon and provides intelligence gathering and fingerprint identification technology for the Department of Homeland Security, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Transportation Security Administration, among other agencies. “Lockheed Martin will be involved in gathering information on the identities of millions of people in the United States as well as millions of tourists entering the country” through a passenger profiling system, a Polaris Institute report states.[16]

To land these contracts and to help the company out when it runs into trouble, Lockheed Martin spent a staggering $55,373,840 on lobbying between 1998 and 2004, and hired 108 different lobby firms to work on 512 different issues before 59 federal agencies.[17] The company donated over $7 million in the last three election cycles; and $915,929 to Congressional candidates in 2004. They made donations to 53 of 62 members House Armed Services Committee, and 51 of 66 members of the Congressional Committee on Appropriations; and 27 of 49 members of the House Select Committee on Homeland Security.[18]

Lockheed Martin’s Environmental Record

“Lockheed Martin production facilities, past and present,” writes Richard Girard for the Polaris Institute, “have also inflicted damage on the land and people who lived and worked near these plants. Much of the pollution from the production process occurred during the Cold War era when weapons manufacturing reached a peak rate and environmental laws in the United States were less stringent. Even though the cold war ended over a decade ago, Lockheed Martin earmarked $420 million in 2004 toward cleaning up the mess it made during the last 50 years”.[19]

Given this record, Tallevast residents are not the first (nor are they likely to be the last) community located near Lockheed Martin facilities to sue the company for environmental contamination.

Among the cases that most closely resemble the contaminated plume in Tallevast are ones in Burbank and Redlands, California.

In Burbank, residents won their suit against Lockheed Martin for having polluted local groundwater due to its improper disposal of industrial solvents and toxic chemicals at its "Skunk Works" plant. In all, the company paid $66.25 million to residents who claimed that the contamination had caused "various illnesses including breast cancer, leukemia, and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma." The company was also ordered by the court to pay most of the $60 million cleanup costs.[20]

In Redlands, the California Regional Water Quality Control Board ordered Lockheed Martin to clean up soil and groundwater pollution originating at its facility there at an estimated cost of $180 million. Some 800 residents sued the company in 1996, arguing that the company had fouled their drinking water with trichloroethylene and perchloroethylene. More residents have since joined the suit. The California Supreme Court recently ruled that each resident must individually "prove they are entitled to medical monitoring."[21]

Farther afield, in November 2004, a court ruling required the company to pay $110 million to clean up radioactive waste from the production of nuclear weapons in Idaho Falls.[22] In June 1999, Lockheed Martin was sued by former employees, the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC), and, in 2003, the U.S. Department of Justice, for having "released uranium-contaminated smoke, steam, and gas into the surrounding communities and dumped nuclear, hazardous, and mixed wastes into ditches, pits, and creeks" on and around their Gas Diffusion Plant (where it manufactured enriched uranium for nuclear weapons) in Paducah, Kentucky between 1984 and 1998.[23]

"Not By Might But by Right"

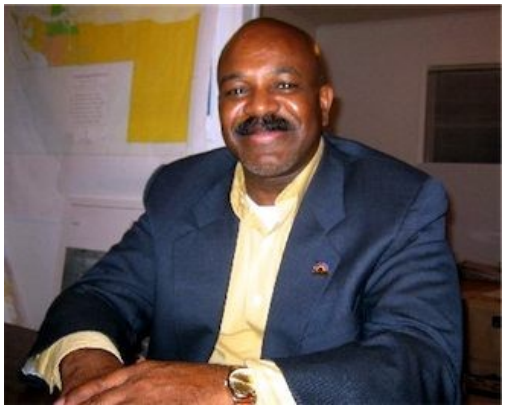
What is striking about the behavior of Tallevast residents in standing up to Lockheed Martin, the giant weapons and surveillance company, is how temperate and patient they have been after discovering they had been drinking contaminated water for decades. "We didn't grow up demonstrating," one resident explained. "We were taught you could get more with honey than with vinegar."

While residents have begun to speak out about the health problems they think have been caused by the contamination, there have been no marches to the county offices or civil disobedient actions. Instead, they have organized regular meetings, held candlelight vigils, and put up signs along the road at either end of town saying, "Welcome to Toxic Tallevast" and "Leaving Tallevast, Decontaminate."

"This is a God-fearing, church-going community," observes Rev. Willie Smith, associate minister of Mt. Tabor Missionary Baptist Church, which was founded in 1907 and has a congregation of 150 souls. "We are strong in our beliefs and we know we will be alright but we need to expose what happened here. There are supposed to be checks and balances in our system of government to protect us from these kinds of problems… but nobody checked."

It is mostly communities of color that are the focal points for the worst contamination problems, Smith adds.

Echoing Smith's view about the racial component of the problem is Rev. Charles S. McKenzie, Jr., who describes himself as a spiritual advisor to FOCUS. McKenzie helps FOCUS with strategic decisions and provides a national perspective. He is also a state volunteer coordinator for Rev. Jessie Jackson's non-profit PUSH. The type of contamination story playing out in Tallevast "is often embedded in communities of color," notes McKenzie. "These communities become dumping grounds and don't have the political clout to stop it."



Rev. Charles S. McKenzie, Jr.
Photo: Steve Lerner

McKenzie credits Laura Ward and Wanda Washington for uncovering the contamination in their community and doing a good job of bringing it to the attention of local reporters, though, he notes, the struggle for relocation had yet to grab the attention of national media. Ward and Washington have done a good job of "channeling the anger in town in creative ways" as well as being "good models and mood-setters for the rest of the community."
"In the black church we are over-comers no matter how large the Leviathan," says McKenzie, falling into a preacher's cadence. "While Tallevast residents face a David and Goliath contest, it is not size but justice that will ultimately prevail. The strength and ability of community residents has to do with the rightness of their cause. Many battles are won not by might but by right." While he believes that a "Providential Hand" will help Tallevast residents prevail against one of the biggest weapons firms in the world, he also hopes to raise the profile of the Tallevast struggle with Jessie Jackson and with members of the Congressional Black Caucus.

While preachers talk about "David and Goliath" contests and the "Providential Hand," Dr. Clarence (Billy) Ward, the town dentist, is looking for something more worldly. "I'd like to see Lockheed Martin stand up and admit that a wrong has been committed and that they are sincere about making it right," he says, standing next door to his dental surgery practice, in the office building that he and his wife have given over to FOCUS. "Our roots are here and it is unfair that we are being driven from our homes because of the neglect of others. No one can make up for the blood, sweat, and tears that have fashioned the Ward home." Nevertheless, he thinks it only right that Lockheed Martin should foot the bill for the relocation of all residents who want to move, as well as provide "fair compensation" for the health problems and loss of equity that resulted from the contamination that spread from their facility.

Four years ago Ward asked Lockheed Martin officials for a list of other fenceline communities with contamination problems so that he could visit them and see how they have been treated. The company has yet to provide him with a list. "Lockheed Martin officials have been paternalistic towards us by telling us what we need," says Ward, who notes that they want residents to go to company doctors rather than their own. "But we are not all asleep here. We realize that it will take decades for them to get the chemicals out of the water and that there has been an intrusion here."

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You can read more stories from this series at the Collaborative on Health and the Environment's website, www.healthandenvironment.org.

NOTES

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