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This Town Is Sick of Drinking Polluted Water

In one of Alabama's poorest and most segregated regions, activists are demanding their right to clean water.

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In Alabama's Black Belt, a region where the vestiges of slavery still manifest in chronic poverty and crumbling infrastructure, a more recent legacy of mining and industry is haunting the land through poisoned waterways and toxic soil.



The clocktower of the old courthouse is surrounded by the American flag and the Alabama State flag at the Monroe County Heritage Museum. (AP Photo / Brynn Anderson)

Yet the region has long been the rural core of civil-rights struggles, and along the Black Belt, local citizens are trying to revive a legacy of activism as they struggle to restore their environment.

In Uniontown—in Perry County, one of the state's poorest—residents say they have been systematically denied the basic dignity of decent sanitation—what activists see as the residue of institutionalized racism.

With fewer than 1,800 people, 90 percent of whom are black, Uniontown is saddled with a deteriorating, mismanaged wastewater treatment system, and a government that residents say has proven indifferent to the resulting toxic threat.

Local wastewater is supposed to be treated through a method known as sprayfields, which channel effluent waste into fields to be dispersed and percolated into soil. But environmentalists complain the sprayfield system has become a toxic cesspool, and a newly constructed one has been botched.

Retired schoolteacher Ben Eaton, a member of Black Belt Citizens Fighting for Health & Justice (BBC) tells *The Nation* he's seen firsthand seemingly contaminated water coming out of the faucet. While the group lacks the funds to do comprehensive testing of the water and sanitation systems, most residents, he says, have resorted to using bottled water: "It's not just sometimes; anytime we have a fire, our water becomes brown, every time we have a bursted water main, our water becomes brown."

According to Eaton, the water problems reflect real racial and economic divides in the region. "It's just a poor area, and it's predominantly black. So we're not getting any help from [state

environmental authorities] and we're definitely not getting any help from the city officials ... Anything we get back, it's always [officials saying they] don't know what we're talking about."

BBC argues that, had officials only listened to residents when the town obtained over \$2 million in US Department of Agriculture funding to redress the sewage crisis in 2012, it would not have wasted federal and local bond money on a solution that has only created more toxic waste.

Residents fear the options for a revamp now before the City Council might repeat the same mistakes: The government could spend about \$11.4 million to build more sprayfields, which BBC says might simply allow polluted runoff to continue polluting local waterways. The fairest, safest option, they argue, would be to build a completely new mechanical treatment plant that would pipe wastewater into a local creek, estimated to cost about \$12.6 million.

But in the long term, activists seek a political sea change: They demand that the city scrap the engineering firm that worked on the last sprayfield project, Sentell, and select "a new engineer based on a democratic, town-hall decision-making process." They also want a transparent investigation of city lawmakers on alleged mismanagement of the federal infrastructure funds. And they demand political and environmental restitution by mandating that "Responsible industries pay for their fair share of the system," without rate increases for consumers. (Sentell has claimed it has worked to improve the sanitation infrastructure, but the extent of the pollution was greater than anticipated.)

According to Eaton, "We'll continue to complain till we can't." Over time, "the people in this area have been taken advantage of for so long. It's like—I've used the word 'learned helplessness' before—they've just learned to be helpless, not getting any support from the officials or anyone else." With a 43 percent poverty rate, he adds, many simply can't afford to move. "We're just stuck with a problem that won't go away."

Meanwhile, amid political delay (last year plans for testing the new sprayfield were held up over regulatory disputes, Al Jazeera reported), waste continues to flow freely: A 2015 "sewer overflow" report revealed that more than 100,000 gallons had discharged from the sprayfield dam.

The US Human Rights Network (USHRN) has campaigned alongside BBC to help link Uniontown's water issues to a transnational environmental -justice movement spreading across the Global South to secure the right to clean water resources. USHRN is fostering US-based campaigns to help communities secure safe water and sanitation systems, from drought-ridden California farmlands to the lead-tainted pipelines of Flint, Michigan—all places where a mix of corporate power and failed governance have undermined public health and democracy among poor communities.

Ahead of a City Council hearing on Monday (later cancelled), USHRN executive director Ejim Dike said in a statement, "Access to clean water and sanitation is an internationally recognized human right, not a privilege.... Uniontown must agree to and follow through with the demands from Black Belt Citizens...and ensure that every resident has clean water and working sanitation."

While sewage overruns plague farm fields and households, the town's Arrowhead Landfill has in recent years swelled with coal ash-contaminated soil, much of it hauled in from Tennessee, dumping residents with noxious soil that has reportedly been linked to respiratory and other

diseases. The pollution crises only add to Uniontown's many other ills, including segregated, impoverished schools and deep unemployment.

As town officials mull over the sewage system, environmental-justice activists who have long been ignored by authorities feel strangely heartened by recent community backlash.

In the BBC's separate campaign against the Arrowhead landfill, members were recently hit with a \$30 million defamation lawsuit brought by the controlling company, Green Group Holdings. The evidence of alleged slander included a Facebook message declaring:

ARROWHEAD LANDFILL AND GREEN GROUP HOLDINGS ARE TRESPASSING
AND DESECRATING A BLACK CEMETERY. BLACK LIVES MATTER! BLACK ANCESTORS MATTER!

Speaking to observers on an environmental community tour on Monday, BBC coordinator Adam Johnston linked Uniontown's racial past to today's fight for ecological reclamation: "It is our duty to protect those who have gave birth to us, our mothers and our planet. And we've got to do it now. There is no turning back."

Half a century ago, the Black Belt's civil-rights activists fought to redeem the words of Martin Luther King Jr., about justice rolling down like water. While the environmental legacy of black suffering still runs deep here, the movement for black lives in Uniontown keeps rolling forward.