

Some Thoughts on the Water Situation at Marion

Steve, 3/4/89

I thought that it might be helpful to try to summarize what I have been able to read about the water at Marion. Some of what I write is based on Tim's analysis while other information comes from news clippings, legal documents, and government reports. This won't be long, but I have many documents and a few more thoughts if anyone is interested.

Crab Orchard Lake, the Marion Prison water supply, is located in Crab Orchard National Wildlife Refuge. The Refuge is very large and is located in four counties. The Refuge was formed in the 1940s and many "defense" industries were brought to the area in response to war needs and the lack of jobs in the region. These companies polluted, dumped, and wasted like crazy, and then left. The toxic waste in the area is undisputed by all and the soil in many places is almost pure poison. For example, some soil levels have been measured to be composed of 25% PCBs, one of the most poisonous known substances. Other toxic wastes abound, like dioxins (the essence of Agent Orange), furons, and more. All of these toxins can cause enormous problems (aches, pains, neurologic dysfunction, muscle disorders) when present in very small amounts and death when present in slightly larger amounts.

As you can imagine there are several government agencies involved in this mess, including the US EPA, the Illinois EPA, the Fish and Wildlife Service, the Department of "Defense," the Department of the Interior, the city of Marion, and others. They all agree on the existing contamination of the soil which is certainly unheard of in public parks. As Tim says, this is the only wildlife refuge to be cited as a toxic waste dump and its seriousness can be determined by noting that it is part of the EPA's Superfund priority list for emergency cleanup. What the disagreement is about, and it is substantial, is what danger exists from this toxic waste as long as one does not eat the soil - which is now fenced off with barbed wire.

The discussion of this topic goes something like this. In 1981 some profs at SIU did a study of livers from deer that were killed in the area and found that they had very high lead levels, which is very toxic. About four years later, some other profs did a study and found that there were high levels of PCB's in fish from Crab Orchard Lake, predominantly catfish and others that hang around at the bottom. The concluding analysis was that one should not eat catfish and other fatty fish from that area. It seems that PCBs are not water soluble but generally fall to the bottom of the lake and the fish eat the particles. PCBs accumulate by being passed from one organism to another. Thus, once a catfish consumes PCB's, it will be infected for life and a human that eats this ctafish will be similarly infected. There is thus now a major set of institutions and rules that discuss which fish one can eat and this is debated by everyone, including the newspapers which seem not to believe what any of these

government agencies tell them.

What about the water and the prisoners. Well, the US EPA has done a massive testing of all toxic aspects of the Refuge and the Lake. One part of their report indicates that the Lake water is just fine. This is consistent with the known fact that PCBs are not water soluble. I visited the US EPA in the federal building and the woman I spoke to, who seemed to me to be an idealistic scientist and not a bureaucrat, told me that she thought that the report, which is public for all to see, is accurate in this regard.

On the other hand, we know that the prisoners report many symptoms which appear to be a result of drinking and showering with lousy water. So what should we think?

In about 1984 a prisoner at Marion filed a class action suit against the water. The prisoner left Marion and thus had to take his name off the suit. Four other prisoners signed on, however, and the case is moving ahead. The lead prisoner named is Michael Sizemore. A group called Trial Lawyers for Public Justice from D.C. is apparently helping with the suit and the main lawyer on the case is Steve Feinberg from Chicago. The stuff about the suit is very interesting. Although all official information suggests that the water is ok, the government and the BOP are protesting furiously against Feinberg doing a survey of the water at Marion and taking blood samples from the prisoners. Feinberg has stated in court that if these samples do not show problems, he will drop the suit. Nonetheless, the BOP will not yet allow him these samples and the fight continues in court.

Thus, pending further developments, what should our position be? Nancy thinks that it should be that no one else is forced to drink the water, that no one knows what the current levels of toxicity is, that no one knows what it used to be, and that no one knows what it will be. Based upon all of this uncertainty, there is no reason for the prisoners to be drinking and showering in the water and that our demand should be for a new water supply now. We shouldn't have to wait until the water is demonstrated to be lethal. Any doubt should be cause enough to change - today!

One more interesting observation. Ben Chavis' UCC Commission of Racial Justice commissioned in 1987 a study entitled "Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States." The report is quite an excellent scientific document. It demonstrates that toxic waste sites are overwhelmingly located in communities of people of color. For example,

* "Three out of every five Black and Hispanic Americans lived in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites."

* "More than 15 millions Blacks and 8 million Hispanics lived in communities with one or more uncontrolled toxic waste sites."

* "Approximately half of all Asian/Pacific Islanders and American Indians lived in communities with uncontrolled toxic waste sites."