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Neighbors say coal terminals are hurting the coast and their health

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Posted on February 3, 2014 at 10:32 PM

Updated today at 10:03 AM

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PLAQUEMINES PARISH, La. - The historically African-American town of Ironton has fought for everything it has, including a highly publicized battle for running water in the 1980s.

Now, neighbors in the historic community are taking on another fight, this time against a nearby industry that they believe is destroying their quality of life.

“This is coal dust all over the car.”

Cornell Battle said black dust coats just about everything in his Ironton community.

“See how black it is? The lungs, if it's sticking to the truck like this, this could be your lungs,” he said. “We can't even sit on our porch with white pants on.”

Battle believes the dust is coming from a coal export terminal about three miles downriver.

Massive mounds of coal stretch along Hwy. 23 at International Marine Terminals, or IMT, in Port Sulphur. But perhaps the most powerful images are from the air.

The Gulf Restoration Network captured images in September showing large amounts of what appear to be coal dust and its byproducts in the Mississippi River beneath IMT's conveyor belt. They're worried metals sometimes found in coal dust could harm wetlands and wildlife in the river.

Company spokeswoman Melissa Ruiz said the photos don't represent normal operations because the company was installing a pumping system at the time.

But environmentalists say images captured at a second coal terminal just across the river, United Bulk in Davant, prompted the state to launch an investigation.

In June, an inspector with the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality took his own pictures, saying coal and petroleum coke was falling from conveyor belts onto the river batture. United Bulk responded by saying it can only clean spills when the river is low. When the river is high, the water covers piles of coal, preventing clean up.

The DEQ said that violates state permits and issued a warning letter.

United Bulk has not returned repeated calls for comment, but a DEQ inspection report shows the facility agreed to fix the problem by 2015.

DEQ records show numerous complaints involving coal dust in the air and water near United Bulk.

What's more, environmentalists say the company is violating the Clean Water Act, and in November they filed an intent to sue.

“They're polluting our waterways, they're polluting our marshes, they're polluting the air,” said Grace Morris, the campaign organizer for the Gulf Restoration Network. “We need to see enforcement.”

Warren Lawrence snapped a photo of what appears to be a large cloud of coal dust

moving toward his Myrtle Grove home last year. To this day, he says you can see coal dust in his pool from IMT.

In 2008, Lawrence was among residents who sued the company, claiming dust from the terminal was coating his neighborhood.

“Are we the dumping grounds?” asked Lawrence.

Until this year, IMT was one of the few coal export terminals in the country operating without a dust-suppressing sprinkler system, said Scott Bickford, a lawyer for the residents. The facility just finished installing one as part of a settlement agreement, but neighbors have yet to see if it will keep the dust down, said Bickford.

Lawrence recognizes the economic impact coal export terminals have for the parish.

“I don't want anyone to lose a job. I want everything to be continued to have prosperity,” said Lawrence. “I just want it to be done in a clean fashion.”

That's why Battle and Lawrence have teamed up with neighbors in communities near IMT to monitor the air themselves. Their focus now is on small particles that could cause serious health effects called particulate matter. So far, some results have shown levels deemed unhealthy by the World Health Organization, but well within EPA standards.

Still, residents believe dust from the terminal is impacting their health, and their tests will continue.

“I have asthma, my wife has health issues with breathing,” said Battle.

“From asthma to all type of respiratory, kids are being born with respiratory problems in this community,” said Audrey Trufant-Salvant, a longtime Ironton resident.

An independent third party operates air monitors on IMT's terminal and consistently reports acceptable results, according to Ruiz.

Coal dust can cause serious health effects over time in high concentrations, but the further you are from a terminal, the less likely the impact, said Dr. LuAnn White, an environmental toxicologist at Tulane University.

“Certainly there's a possibility, if you have asthma, if you have other serious respiratory diseases, that any of these dusts could irritate those pre-existing conditions,” said White.

While residents believe dust from large uncovered piles of coal is making them sick, they're afraid another proposed coal terminal just up the road could do the same thing.

“It will be devastating. It will be devastating to this community,” said Battle. “We won't be able to live here.”

There's already a sign on the 600-acre site for the proposed RAM coal terminal in Belle Chasse.

In a map of RAM's plans, you can see an 80 foot pile of coal about a mile upriver from Ironton, and barges filled with coal would be even closer to the town.

“The intrusions of the coal plants would minimize our quality of life to the fact you no longer can enjoy sitting out on your porch,” said Trufant-Salvant.

Plaquemines Parish President Billy Nungesser acknowledges there have been complaints, but he said there's no data to show coal dust is polluting the environment or making people sick.

“A lot of times you get people in the community that throw things out there to scare people,” said Nungesser. “Rest assured, we want the people of Plaquemines to be safe, but we want them to work hand in hand with industry.”

But the proposed RAM coal terminal isn't the only thing that would be on the property. A sediment diversion that's a key part of the state's coastal master plan would also be located right near the coal terminal.

The multi-million dollar project is meant to build back Louisiana's disappearing wetlands by diverting sand from the river into the Barataria Basin.

The Mid-Barataria project as well as some of the other projects that are designed to reconnect the river with some of the adjacent wetland areas are absolutely foundational to the success of the 2012 master plan,” said Garrett Graves, chair of the Coastal Protection and Restoration Authority.

Graves said the master plan is critical for our coast. But environmentalists worry the proposed RAM terminal flies in the face of the plan, because it could affect the river's flow, drastically decreasing the amount of vital sand the diversion carries.

“It did make us go back and look at our project and figure out if we were going to have to make changes to accommodate for the RAM terminal,” said Graves.

The state's own study shows an alarming amount of sand could be lost if the RAM terminal is built- nearly 500,000 tons in a decade. But the state green lighted the terminal anyway as long as it follows an agreement aimed at minimizing the effects on coastal restoration.

“This was really the first test that we had that we had to show some type of adaptability or co-existence with economic development,” said Graves.

According to the agreement, the RAM terminal will stop operations, for up to 15 days at a time, when the river reaches a level considered optimal for sediment build up.

But the state's study shows, even if the coal terminal isn't operating, it's very presence would still have an impact, with nearly 70,000 tons of sand lost over a decade. The state's study also notes that falling debris and dust could be transported into marshes, causing potential environmental issues, and suggests further analysis.

“We've seen state officials willing to sell out the future of southern Louisiana to one out of state coal company,” said Morris.

Now, environmental groups are suing the state's Department of Natural Resources for issuing a coastal use permit to RAM, saying it directly conflicts with the master plan.

In a statement, spokesman Patrick Courreges says, "DNR maintains that our staff properly applied our regulatory procedures... within the bounds set for the agency by state law."

But that doesn't ease the concerns of residents

“I'm fighting to try to stop it before it comes. So our community can be safe, so we can live here, and our quality of life will stay the same,” said Battle.

It's a quality of life for which residents have fought for generations and they're not going to stop now.

The proposed RAM facility needs two more permits to move forward, including one from the Army Corps of Engineers.

Corps spokesman Ricky Boyett said the Corps did its own engineering analysis that found the RAM terminal could co-exist with the sediment diversion.

But before the Army Corps of Engineers can issue a permit, it must meet with concerned citizens and approve a wetlands mitigation plan for RAM.

Our calls to Armstrong Coal, the company that would run the ram coal terminal, have not been returned.