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By Travers Mackel B10 »

LDEQ Finds Problems At Plaquemines Dump

Compliance order issued to site in Venice

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Just a little more than the length of a football field separates a Plaquemines Parish landfill from one of the busiest marinas in the gulf south, and the WDSU I-Team has obtained an internal report outlining all sorts of concerns at the facility.

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The internal report has concerns from exposed waste to liquid runoff making its way into waterways to unlined over filled parts of the dump.

The findings were made by the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality, and until the I-Team brought it to their attention, some parish leaders were unaware what was discovered.

For retired Air Force officer A.J. East, the small fishing hole near the Venice Marina, in south end of Plaquemines Parish, is a hot spot.

"I come out here once or twice a month when I get out," said East.

Because like most outdoorsmen familiar with these waters, East rarely leaves empty handed.

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"Because this is one of the most dominant fishing districts in Louisiana," he said.

And it's also the area where the Department of Environmental Quality is conducting an active investigation.

The target is this dump site adjacent to the busy Cypress Cove Marina -- it's called the Coast Guard Road Sanitary Landfill, and it's filled with household trash, waste and debris picked up all from across Plaquemines Parish.

From businesses in Belle Chasse to homes in Port Sulphur, if you tossed it into the garbage in this parish, it likely ends up here.

And the WDSU I-Team has learned that over the past year and half, the DEQ has found problems at the landfill.

The concerns -- and the potential violations -- are laid out in an internal audit and include:

A broken compactor onsite and indications that waste hadn't been compacted for a period of more than one year -- prior to the inspection.

Contaminated soil from treated BP waste. According to the report, there was no barrier to prevent runoff from "going directly into the adjacent water body."

Creosote pilings -- those are chemically treated posts -- mixed with household garbage.

One area far exceeded its permitted size. It's supposed to be 50 square feet, but the DEQ found the company used three times that amount of space with "no berms installed around the working face to control stormwater runoff."

Inspectors found waste spilling over berms and into unlined areas and leachate flowing into unlined areas.

A company called Tidewater LLC and its parent company, Environmental Operators, manage the facility. Public records show they were awarded a contract from the parish.

"It raises a concern for me," said Councilman Burghart Turner.

Turner says he was unaware of the situation until WDSU brought it to his attention.

"Areas that can reach the waterways that can have an environmental impact on the waterways -- it needs to be scrutinized strictly to make sure we do not have these problems," Turner said.

A DEQ spokesperson told the I-Team that compliance orders and notices of potential penalties have been sent to Environmental Operators.

That's DEQ's way of trying to enforce rules and regulations that apply to landfill owners.

Watchdog groups are taking note.

"What's happening seems very disturbing; seems like they have lots of violations," said Matt Rota, with Gulf Restoration Network.

Rota's group advocates for safe waterways in Louisiana.

He says the leachate -- or liquid from the waste collected -- worries him the most.

"The leachate coming from the landfill can be really problematic. If you think about the things you throw away -- old food, household liquids, other waste -- that all ends up in the landfill, and those liquids, if they are not properly maintained, get into area's waters, and I don't want old fruit,

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household cleaners and other things flowing into the water where I recreate," said Rota.

In a written statement, Tidewater LLC said: "In response to questions posed to us regarding the pending compliance order issued by the Louisiana Department of Environmental Quality ("LDEQ") directed to Tidewater's landfill located in Venice Louisiana many of the issues have been corrected and resolved. Prior to the issuance of the compliance order Tidewater began taking action to resolve these issues and we will continue to diligently work to resolve all of these issues raised by the compliance order. None of the issue raised in the compliance order pose a hazard to the health or wellbeing of any persons. A review and fair assessment of LDEQ's records will reveal that Tidewater has experienced fewer compliance issues than other local landfills. Tidewater will continue to strive to serve and operate in a safe and responsible manner."

"It really seems DEQ needs to step up," said Rota.

Turner says he plans to launch an inquiry into the matter now that he knows the state is investigating.

"We want to see the company succeed but not at the expense of the people or the environment," Turner said.

WDSU contacted Tidewater LLC but an official cancelled a scheduled interview, choosing instead to send the statement.

Read Full Statement

The parish just signed a new agreement with environmental operators in June of this year. That agreement is for five years.

DEQ records show that in the last 30 years, dump sites in both Jefferson Parish and New Orleans have received compliance orders.



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