



The Black Belt Community Foundation

DATA IMPACT CENTER

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It's not just in the air, it's in the ground

Black Belt counties throughout the state are facing increasingly difficult environmental quality challenges relative to land usage—also coined as “environmental injustice”—specifically with regards to air quality and/or waste disposal. There has seemingly always been a correlation between environmental injustice and poverty—especially throughout the Black Belt region.

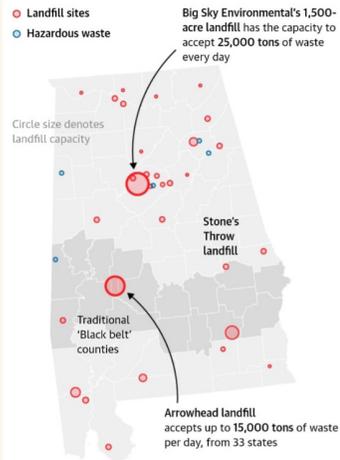
As of 2020, Alabama had a total of 168 operational landfills—more than three times as many as the state of New York per capita. Many of the largest landfills in the state are located in the Black Belt counties which is attributed to low land values and extreme poverty. In many cases, the dire conditions are coupled with the competing and conflicting interests of private landowners; resulting in local residents being blindsided by the appearance of new dumping sites and lacking the support from local and state officials to “regulate” the number of sites or the substances being disposed. State officials have little or no power to regulate dumping on private lands, leaving many of these communities with the lingering stench of foul air and health issues such as chronic asthma along with other respiratory and cardiovascular complications resulting from the hazardous waste fumes, drift, and leaching.

The Chemical Waste Management landfill near the town of Emelle, Alabama is known as the single largest hazardous waste landfill in the United States. Emelle is in Sumter County where nearly a third of the residents live below poverty level and 90% of the people residing near the landfill are African American. At one point, the landfill accepted and disposed of nearly 40% of all hazardous waste in the U.S. resulting in a myriad of health issues for residents living near the site’s 12.8 million pounds of toxic releases. In the early 1990s, in response to the dangers, local residents banded together and took legal action against the disposal company and its continued hazardous waste disposal activities, taking their case all the way to the Supreme Court. Unfortunately, their legal efforts were unsuccessful; and, to make matters worse the State Legislature lowered the disposal fees for burying waste at the Emelle site with proponents citing such would boost usage of the landfill and create more jobs in West Alabama—an uphill argument to fight against at best. Consequently, the ordeal of the residents of Emelle and Sumter County continues to this day—unabated and unchallenged.

Another example is Uniontown, a small city in Perry County, Alabama, approximately 70 miles west of the state capital. Uniontown’s population is almost 85% African American with an average per capita income of \$12,295 and an estimated 49% living below poverty level. The citizens of Uniontown have been suffering from the differential burden of air, water, and soil contamination due to two distinct pollution sources: The Arrowhead Landfill and The Southeastern Cheese Corporation manufacturing plant. Possible hazardous exposures associated with the Arrowhead Landfill’s operations include diesel exhaust constituents and coal fly ash containing several toxic heavy metals such as arsenic, mercury, and cadmium; meanwhile, the Cheese Manufacturing plant is accused of overloading the town’s already antiquated wastewater system through unlawful waste discharge from the plant, resulting in massive soil and water contaminations.

Indeed, this is a growing trend leading to residents developing many chronic health conditions directly linked to these polluting facilities and and their lingering and consequential affects; and adding another layer of complexity to the ongoing challenges facing many of the communities and regions of the Black Belt.

Sources: theguardian.com (4/15/19); ceejh.center/air-quality (3/26/21); insider.com (8/11/20); adem.alabama.gov/ (9/30/20); latimes.com/archives



Map Credit: theguardian.com; Sources: Alabama Department of Environmental Management. US Census Bureau



The Arrowhead Landfill in Uniontown, AL sprawls over an area twice the size of New York City's Central Park, accepting the waste from 33 different states. Photo Credit: John L. Wathen/MCT/Tribune News Service via Getty Image



Chemical Waste Management landfill in Emelle, AL serves as a regional disposal and transfer facility managing liquid and solids drums containing industrial and hazardous waste. Photo Credit: <https://www.wmsolutions.com/pdf/factsheet/EmelleBrochure.pdf>

Landfills in Alabama - Alabama has 35 landfill sites per million residents, compared with New York State which has just three for every million.



168
Landfills in the State of Alabama

32
Municipal Solid Waste Landfills

54
Industrial Landfills

82
Construction and Demolition Landfills