

## ST. GABRIEL, LA.

Life amid one of the nation's mightiest petrochemical complexes confronts residents and workers in Ascension Parish with a dilemma: Can they peacefully coexist with the belching **chemical** plants that surround them, or will the noise, fear and millions of tons of toxins spewed into their environment prove too hazardous?

The Geismar-St. Gabriel complex, home to 18 **chemical** plants and refineries in a five-mile stretch alongside the Mississippi River 55 miles northwest of New Orleans, can be a troubling neighbor. For example:

\* State environmental officials were baffled last year when a groundwater sample taken from beneath Geismar showed unexpected **chemical** contamination. After an investigation, inspectors discovered that the water sample had been exposed to the air momentarily while being drawn, and chemicals from the air had simply dissolved on the water's surface. "That indicates some pretty serious air problems in that area," said Joey Hebert, then a state groundwater inspector.

\* When the giant new flare at the Union Texas Petroleum ethylene plant began shooting bright orange flame hundreds of feet into the air last year, neighbors in Geismar thought they were under attack.

"It felt like a Skyhook helicopter hovering 50 feet above the house," said Jim Gentry, who lives about a half-mile from the **chemical** plant. "You could see the window frames bend in and out."

Plant officials concede the flare, which operates during plant malfunctions, had vibration problems that did create a sound a lot like a helicopter. Today, after design changes, the flare just makes its customary noise: like a jetliner taking off.

\* **Chemical** fumes sickened workers at BASF's huge petrochemical plant on several occasions in late 1988 and early 1989. But employees were surprised to learn the fumes weren't coming from their plant. The source was an old waste pond at Rubicon **Chemical** next door, which contained nitrobenzene, a **chemical** suspected of causing cancer and reproductive damage.

In the face of state inaction, BASF union spokesman Richard Miller wrote to the state Department of Environmental Quality asking, "Need I wonder that if you were directly impacted by these nitrobenzene odors, you might feel somewhat differently about the impact on your reproductive organs?" Rubicon finally consented to spray the pile of waste in the old pond with a layer of foam to try to limit air emissions.

The DEQ has pushed industries to address what it sees as two major threats to the St. Gabriel and Geismar communities: the release of a myriad of toxic chemicals into the air, and the possible contamination of underground water supplies from old hazardous waste dumps and **chemical** spills.

Several plant sites in the complex have suffered groundwater contamination at depths ranging from a few yards to 125 feet, state documents show.

"A large percentage of the folks there use individual wells," said Joel Lindsey, deputy director of DEQ. "It raises some alarms."

And on the air side, more than 12.5 million pounds of toxic chemicals were discharged throughout the Geismar-St. Gabriel complex in 1988, the latest year for which comprehensive statistics are available. That's more emissions in the small geographic area than in 11 individual states.

Last year, Louisiana State University environmental toxicologist Barbara Shane completed a ranking system for the worst toxic air pollutants in Louisiana as part of a contract with DEQ.

In 1988, 7 million pounds of Shane's 25 most toxic chemicals were discharged into the air above St. Gabriel-Geismar. Three-fourths of that total came from three **chemical** plants: Borden **Chemical** and Plastics Corp., Arcadian Corp. and Shell **Chemical**.

**Industry** leaders insist there's no threat to public health, citing studies that show few chemicals in the air on a daily basis in the community.

But researchers and state officials say they don't think the community will be truly safe until there's a dramatic reduction in the chemicals released from the plants - greater even than the substantial decreases in air emissions that have occurred across the board at **chemical** plants in the past 10 years.

"There's a lot of room for improvement," said Joel Lindsey, deputy secretary of DEQ.

That improvement will occur, Lindsey said, only when **industry** abandons the idea that pollution control means only treating **chemical** wastes that come out of the end of a pipe.

The real answer, Lindsey said, is reducing the need for waste disposal by reducing the generation of waste - by changing wastes into products or redesigning processes to make them more efficient.

**Industry** officials point to some projects that achieve those goals as evidence of their attempts to reduce pollution. But Lindsey and other state officials say those efforts are not enough.

And for the residents of Ascension Parish, the small victories in the battle against pollution don't always make it seem like they're winning the war.

"You start to feel like things are getting better," Gentry said, "and then you have an episode with four or five different smells coming across your property in a week."

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Illustration:

St. Gabriel resident Jim Gentry has voiced his complaints about odors and noise from flares and tanks at the nearby Union Texas Petroleum ethylene plant with a handmade billboard posted in front of his house. [COLOR]

Ron H. Lane, environmental manager at Rubicon **Chemical** in Geismar, La., skirts the edge of a waste pit at the plant. The mound was sprayed with foam when fumes affected nearby workers. [COLOR]

2 STAFF PHOTOS BY G. ANDREW BOYD

**Chemical** Concentration

STAFF MAP BY BILL FLOYD

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