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Advocates call for community engagement in wake of toxicity study

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Josiah "Jazz" Watts, right, talks to panel members Glynn County Commissioner Allen Booker, Alice Keyes of One Hundred Miles and Dr. Kavanaugh Chandler, CEO of Coastal Community Health, during a community meeting to discuss findings of a toxicity study conducted by Emory University.

Michael Hall/The Brunswick News

Environmental justice for the Golden Isles after years of contamination from four of the state's 20 federal Superfund sites will only come with a dedicated and lengthy community effort.

That was the message Tuesday from local environmental advocates and others at a community meeting to provide updates and continue community dialogue on a 2023 Emory pilot study that revealed higher than average human exposures locally to chemicals like PCB and Toxaphene.

How contamination from polluting chemicals is cleaned up and remediated at federal and state recognized hazardous sites is up to agencies like the Environmental Protection Agency and Georgia Environmental Protection Division. What happens to those sites after the cleanup is completed and how the community is compensated for the damage done to natural resources is something the people of Glynn County can influence, said Alice Keyes, vice president of coastal conservation for One Hundred Miles.



“We have a voice individually, but collectively we have a much more powerful voice,” Keyes said during a panel discussion of the results of the pilot study at Howard Coffin Park.

She was joined on the panel by Glynn County District 5 County Commissioner Allen Booker, Dr. Kavanaugh Chandler, CEO of Coastal Community Health, Urbana-Perry Park Neighborhood Planning Assembly Chair Anita Collins and Rachael Thompson, executive director of Glynn Environmental Coalition.

All panelists agreed the entire community must come together to fight for repairing damage to the environment, addressing the health needs created by the damage in local people, and to ensure that the past doesn't repeat itself.

The Study

Results from the study were first presented in September 2023 and showed that levels of Polychlorinated biphenyls, or PCBs, Toxaphene and mercury, among other chemicals, in 100 local people's blood were higher-than-average. In some, toxic chemical levels were higher than what is expected to be found in 95% of Americans.

The analysis was prompted by a 2016 study of local dolphins and some Sapelo Island residents that showed high levels of PCBs in their blood as well as the proximity with which many residents live to one of the four Superfund sites in Glynn County. The goal was only to establish if humans had been exposed to harmful chemicals and to what level. The study did not try to answer where, how, or why those humans were exposed, said Dr. Noah Scovronick, a researcher with the Rollins School of Public Health at Emory.

He told an audience of about 100 people the study team is still going through results and that the peer review process of the study is still underway.

Along the way he said the team has come up with a few more results. They believe with high confidence that PCB and Toxaphene exposure was higher among participants older than 60. The team also believes with medium confidence that PCB exposure was generally higher among Black participants. They have a lower level of confidence that exposure to all the chemicals tested were higher among fishermen.

Scrovonick said the team has a higher level of confidence that people who worked at one of the Superfund sites or who lived with someone who worked at one of the sites tended to have higher exposure to three types of PCBs and one type of Toxaphene.

There appears to be no obvious association with whether people were using well or municipal water sources, he said.

Attendees asked about how where someone lives impacts their exposure to the chemicals. Scrovonick said the study team hopes to address those types of questions with a larger study for which they are currently seeking funding.

"That's a more complicated question," he said.

Booker, who is also part of the Community First Planning Commission, said more money is needed to expand the study and get clearer answers to some of the questions the community has.

“Frankly, we need more money to continue this study,” he said. “Everybody is a stakeholder in this.”

The Community’s Part



Booker participated in the study and said he has contaminants in his blood. Understanding the impacts of those contaminants on health and how people become contaminated is crucial.

“I want to figure out how to help,” he said. “How to make sure that everyone has access to the healthcare and what to do about this.”

His organization worked with One hundred Miles, Glynn Environmental Coalition, Environmental Justice Advocacy Board, Coastal Equity and Resilience Hub, Coastal Community Health, the UGA Marine Extension and Georgia Sea Grant and Emory to complete the pilot study.

They will continue to work with the Emory researchers when a potentially expanded study gets underway, Booker said.

For now, he wants everyone to know why it matters.

“Y’all, this is serious business,” he said.

While the study didn’t address the potential health impacts of PCBs, Toxaphene, mercury and other chemicals in people’s blood, Chandler said having proof people have been exposed and to what is the first step in understanding how healthcare providers can begin to address potential health problems.

As a federally qualified health clinic that provides healthcare to all comers, regardless of insurance status, Chandler said Coastal Community Health's involvement in the study was important so doctors there can be armed with the knowledge of what chemical exposures are prevalent. People who have proof of exposure can begin to ask the proper questions to address their health needs.

"It's an opportunity to be educated so you can hold us accountable to find additional resources to support your health," he said.

Collins said seeing the higher exposure levels of people who worked at places like Hercules, the LCP Chemical plant or Brunswick Wood Preserving, which are responsible for the four Superfund sites in Glynn County, shows how widespread the contamination can be.

"All of us in here probably know someone who worked at LCP or worked at Hercules," she said.

"Working those jobs provided for the household, so it's a bitter pill when that was your source of income and that was also damaging the soil you walked on and the air you breathe and the water you bathe in."

That soil, water and air are the natural resources which Keyes says the community must remain vigilant to reclaim. She said that while Emory is studying the impacts to the human body, Glynn County agencies, governments and people should push for a timely Natural Resources Damage Assessment, or NRDA, after the federal cleanup efforts are considered complete. An NRDA looks at the natural resources lost by the public to the damage from pollution of all kinds. Superfund sites get NRDA's, but they can take a long time, she said.

"This community has an opportunity to pressure the state and federal agencies who are responsible for conducting the NRDA so that we can understand fully how much we have lost," Keyes said. "This community has an opportunity to move forward and pressure the fish and wildlife service, and NOAA so that we as a community have the opportunity to reclaim those natural resources."

An estimate in 2002 by a third party of the 800-acre LCP Superfund site suggested it could cost \$30 billion to restore the natural resources damaged by mercury and other chemicals. Today, that would be around \$41 billion, Keyes said.

In the meantime, Thompson said groups like Glynn Environmental Coalition will continue to monitor the Superfund sites and all the impacts they may have to all parts of the environment. The Coalition plans to begin an air monitoring program this year to get a better picture of all the ways contaminants enter the local environment, whether from past or current pollution.

Josiah “Jazz” Watts, who works in environmental justice with One Hundred Miles, moderated the panel discussion and said the panel members represent a grassroots effort to push for community involvement.

“The agencies aren’t doing a very good job getting this information out to us, so we are going to do our part,” he said.



Michael Hall