

Environmental Justice

- ❖ **Environmental Justice** (EJ) refers to addressing, “disproportionately high and adverse human health or environmental effects...on minority populations and low-income populations.” (Executive Order 12,898; signed by President Clinton in 1994.) Executive Order 12,898 requires every federal agency to include EJ as part of its mission.

- ❖ **Warren County, North Carolina**

The struggle of a group of residents in Warren County, NC raised the consciousness of environmental justice in the United States. Warren County was the first national protest by African Americans against a toxic waste dump in their community.

In 1978, 30,000 gallons of PCBs were illegally disposed of along 210 miles of North Carolina roads. This was (and still is) the largest PCB release in U.S. history. The NC State Department of Environment and Natural Resources conducted a siting process for a dump to dispose the PCB-laden soils. The list of more than 100 sites was narrowed down to one site in Afton, Warren County even though that site did not meet that state’s landfill design criteria because the water table beneath the landfill was too shallow.

Warren County was an economically depressed community and home to the highest percentage of African American residents in NC (64%). Local opposition was immediate. This issue united all residents, including the African American community, who had been an inactive force politically up to that time.

Lawsuits were filed to block waste disposal in Warren County but these efforts failed. Trucks carrying PCB-laden waste started arriving in September 1982. There was a demonstration involving thousands of people lasting almost four weeks. The national press covered the events. Lois Gibbs was involved. The protestors blocked the path of the dump trucks resulting in 505 arrests. Finally, the governor met with the protestors and agreed to detoxify the soil “when technologically feasible.” This was a major concession, and the disposal was allowed to happen.

In 1994 this “sanitary landfill” failed, as the opposition predicted. The leachate removal system stopped working and the pressure caused the landfill to leak. The now politically-empowered citizens of Warren County demanded the implementation of the detoxification agreement.

The governor acceded to their demands and agreed to detoxify the site. In early 2000s, the site work was completed and the former landfill was detoxified. Warren County is planning to build a park on the site and dedicate it to the Environmental Justice movement.