

A Haven Becomes a Prison

"It's not the haven it once was," Carolyn Owens said of her beloved native Wayne County in Georgia, where her family has resided since 1831. "It used to be a place for people to get away and to enjoy the outdoors."

Environmental pollution has changed that, though, most recently with the landfilling of toxic coal ash which allegedly resulted in heavy metal contamination of underground water resources.

Owens and her husband own property near the landfill and rent a mobile home to family that has suffered from water contamination, which they believe was caused by coal ash. Hundreds of thousands of tons of coal ash were brought to the county landfill from out of state over the course of eight years, without public knowledge.

The family—a single mother, her parents, and several children—noticed that the well water had become cloudy, almost white, and metallic tasting. After showering, their skin would itch, and one of the boys has had ongoing skin issues without relief.

They had to change faucet water filters weekly instead of monthly, and they purchased water for drinking and washing as well. "For four years, they spent at least \$70 a month on water. It created a tremendous financial burden on them," Owens said.

Consequently, the Owens's business was impacted. They decreased the rent by 25% after the water issues began. The chance of renting the home again is "slim and next to none," she said. Moving the double-wide home to a new location would cost them over \$10,000, and with rental income steadily decreasing in the area, it would be almost impossible to recoup that investment.

The tenant is not in a financial position to move with so many additional water and health-related expenses. "Sometimes it feels like you're just drowning and there's no way out. They would relocate if they had the choice. It would be great if local churches could help this family with relocating," she said.

Owens and the tenant did not know about the "spill" until it came to light years later. They still don't know what they were exposed to, and the landfill company has not offered testing, information, filters, or clean water to nearby residents. Though the water looks and tastes normal now, they still don't drink it.

This is an important issue for people of faith, Owens believes. "I feel God has blessed us abundantly in South Georgia with our natural resources, and we need to be good stewards of what the Lord has blessed us with here. We need to leave it better than when we came, for the sake of future generations."

"Our churches are an integral part of his whole equation, but corporations should be taking the lead [in mitigation] ... Coal ash needs to be handled in a way that is financially sound and responsible, with a good neighbor approach."

The church, she says, should be proactive instead of reactive in environmental issues. "We don't want to hurt our neighbors. We always have to think, What will have least impact on our natural resources, and the health and welfare of our people?"

"I don't know what it is, but I know there's a better way."

Take action:

Quality of life doesn't just happen, especially in rural communities. Groups and citizens must take proactive steps together to assure a healthy, safe, and prosperous future. Churches have an important role in protecting the health and livelihood of their neighbors, through public education and advocacy with community and state leaders. Where quality of life has been diminished by coal ash or other environmental threats, faith communities can provide material support such as water filters and financial support to assist impacted families with a new start.