



COMMUNITY TASK FORCE SUCCESSFULLY ENGAGES THE POWER OF PRECAUTION!

Yomi Noibi

The South Fulton and Fayette Community Task Force recently won an important environmental fight when it forced the Fulton County Commission to deny Philips Services Corporation (PSC) a renewal permit to discharge industrial wastewater into the county sewer system. After weeks of exposure to toxic and odorous chemical emissions from PSC in summer 2006 and mounting claims of illnesses from some 200 residents, the South Fulton and Fayette Community Task Force was formed made up of an inter-racial group of low and middle-income residents from the African American, Hispanic, and White communities of South Fulton and Fayette County. Task Force members trained with ECO-Action for organizing and technical assistance in developing a systematic and organized effort to shut down the PSC waste treatment plant. ECO-Action engaged members of the Task Force on the precautionary principle and on how to apply the ECO-Action organizing guide to their situation

Citizens soon learned from research findings on the nature of their exposure, that the persistent onion-like odor blanketing their community was caused by the

chemical odorant *propyl mercaptan* and pesticide *ethropop* whose trade name is MOCAP. Ethropop is one of the most hazardous pesticides in the nation. According to the New Jersey Hazardous Substance Fact Sheet, "Ethropop can cause severe organophosphate poisoning with headache, sweating, nausea and vomiting, diarrhea, loss of coordination, and death." This organophosphate pesticide is a known carcinogen and neurotoxicant. The Task Force developed a fact sheet on propyl mercaptan and ethropop, which was used to increase residents' knowledge of their exposure and health and safety implications.

More than 600 claims of illness have been filed with the Georgia Division of Public Health by residents. A class action suit has been filed by many of the effected residents against PSC. The lawsuit does not undermine the efforts of the Task Force but instead reinforces the issue. Given the number of claims and the lawsuit, elected officials could no longer overlook a situation that had the ingredients of a severe community health crisis. In a pre-emptive move the day before the scheduled Tuesday town hall meeting, the Fulton County Commission announced an *agreement* with PSC to withdraw its request to renew its waste pretreatment discharge permit which was due to expire December 22nd. Connie Biemiller, the chair of the Task Force challenged state and federal government and elected officials to do what is right.

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ECO-Action Organizing Guide:

First, groups must candidly answer the question: *What do you want to achieve in the short and long term?*

Second, they then must determine: *Who is in a position of power to give it to you? This question requires the group to conduct a power analysis.*

And finally, groups must answer the question: *How do we get what we want? which gives rise to strategy and tactics development and the group's unique organizing opportunity/approach.*

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ECO-ACTION REACHING THE YOUNG AT SOUTH ATLANTA ACADEMY FOR LAW AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

Jeremy Kaplan-Layman, Instructor,
South Atlanta Academy for Law and Social Justice

In August 2006, ECO-Action began a partnership with the Academy of Law and Social Justice at South Atlanta High School. The Academy of Law and Social Justice is a small school within South Atlanta High School. Over the next three years, the Academy of Law and Social Justice will become autonomous, as South Atlanta High School is broken up into four smaller schools. A key focus of the Academy of Law and Social Justice is community organizing. In planning the Academy, Program Director Peter McKnight sought out organizations that could partner with the Academy in promoting its social justice focus. After a series of conversations and meetings with ECO-Action Acting Executive Director Dr. Abayomi Noibi, the Academy began a working relationship with ECO-Action.

Currently, ECO-Action is working with the Academy's social justice organizing group. After conducting a needs analysis, the students and ECO-Action decided to use a school clean up and recycling campaign as tools for teaching community organizing, root cause

analysis of problem/issue, and problem solving. The group also plans to do work in the South Atlanta community around recycling. Through Dr. Noibi and graduate intern Kimberly Austin, ECO-Action has supported the student group in developing and implementing their action campaign, teaching organizing strategy including effective messaging strategies, and how to organize as a group to make a positive difference in the community. As ninth-grader, Gabrielle Whiting explains, "ECO-Action gives us good information about recycling companies and what we need to do to get our organizing done. They are willing to help us with whatever we need in trying to accomplish our goals." So far, the working partnership has been successful with students developing new skills and beginning their action campaign. As ninth-grade student Deeshandra Boykin comments, "***We are working on getting the school to recycle so that our school can be clean. We also are working to clean up our community. ECO-Action is helping us reach our goals by giving us important information on how to organize and by connecting us with other organizations.***"

The Academy of Law and Social Justice looks forward to continuing this partnership that is helping the students empower themselves to make changes in their communities and society.

Note of Appreciation

ECO-Action would like to thank the Environmental Support Center, Mary Reynolds Babcock Foundation, Public Welfare Foundation, Sapelo Foundation, and Southern Partners Fund for their grant support during 2006. We are also indebted to our many individual donors for their financial support to ECO-Action's vision and mission.

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GRASSROOTS ENVIRONMENTAL NETWORK FORUM ON PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE

Cynthia Belinga, ECO-Action Intern from Oglethorpe University

On October 6th and 7th 2006, I attended my first Grassroots Environmental Network's meeting as an Intern with ECO-Action. The meeting was a forum on the precautionary principle. Its purpose was to exchange experiences, ideas, and information with grassroots leaders of courage working to protect human health and the environment in their communities. More than forty people, representing four US Southeastern states participated in the forum. The participants consisted of community leaders-young and old, experienced and rookie organizers, men and women, and people that cut across racial lines. Also present were leaders, trainers and representatives from technical assistance providers, such as Physician for Social Responsibility and Action for a Clean Environment. The forum was facilitated by ECO-Action and co-sponsored by Atlanta WAND .

The fourfold objective of the forum was to: 1) share and exchange information and insights on the precautionary principle; 2) demonstrate how to apply the precautionary principle to prevent or solve problems confronting our local community; 3) Highlight the threats of nuclear power plants and the need to organize to sign on to a campaign to stop two nuclear plants in Georgia; and to 4) brainstorm and outline action steps for applying the precautionary principle at the neighborhood, local, state, and regional levels in order to protect children's health.

After a brief overview of the concept of the precautionary principle (i.e., *taking action based on available evidence to prevent harm rather than waiting for proof*), the participants discussed opportunities to apply the precautionary principle in their communities. We first discussed the issues we are facing in our communities due to nuclear waste, coal fired power plants, and pesticides. Furthermore, we moved on to the achieve-

ments and changes that have been made so far in our communities. We also talked about successful and failed tactics used to achieve social change in our communities. As an example, we talked about the mutual aid/cooperation we should have since we are fighting for the same cause. Another example of tactic is to involve the media in our fight for public awareness. Finally, we talked about how we will start applying the different tactics that will be guided and informed by the results of our power analysis in our community, starting in our "own backyard."

Components of the precautionary principle discussed are: 1) Set Goals for environmental health; 2) Heed Early Warnings; 3) Shift the Burden of Proof; 4) Explore Wide Range of Alternatives; and 5) Increase Public Participation in Decision-Making. I observed that most of the participants were experts in their non-profit organization or as community representatives. They all added interesting ideas and opinions into the discussion on how to apply the precautionary principle in their communities.

It was a very interesting meeting because I got the chance to talk to committed and passionate community leaders on the application of the precautionary principle, and I also got exposure to an alternative way of organizing a community meeting where people were actually engaged in the process of sharing ideas, knowledge, and skills in a meaningful way. I learned more about the locations of nuclear waste in the state of Georgia, and what kind of action communities are taking against its development. For instance, the city of Savannah is one of the most nuclear waste areas in Georgia. The "Nuclear Deception's" video and a power point slide presented by Rita Kilpatrick gave me more insight on the environmental and health effects of nuclear power plants. Also, Ed Arnold and Richard Bright caught my attention by their commitment to help others based on their knowledge in chemistry and human health.

At the end of the second day, I was able to say that it was an experience that showed how community groups work together to share their knowledge and experience. This was a

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unique opportunity for me to see how high passion (commitment) and power are brought together in the decision-making process of preventing harm, rather than permitting it.

MY PRACTICUM EXPERIENCE AT ECO-ACTION

Alicia L. Robertson- ECO-Action Intern
from Morehouse School of Medicine

I would like to share my practicum experience at ECO-Action by responding to the following questions:

What have I learned?

The precautionary principle is something that I have become very familiar with while serving as an ECO-Action intern. During the precautionary principle workshop, I learned about its components and how ECO-Action has used this approach to help several communities. The workshop also gave me the opportunity to meet with environmental health officials from different agencies.

Community organizing is essential in dealing with environmental health issues. I did not realize that communities have to fight for a clean environment. Mobilizing and organizing individuals, neighborhoods, and community groups is essential for making positive changes in the community.

What has been the most memorable experience?

Watching the video, "Exposure: Environmental Links to Breast Cancer" was very shocking to me. As a student

rather, I never realized the association between breast cancer and the environment until now. Watching the video made me realize that the public's focus in dealing with breast cancer has been on early detection and treatment. The health industries promote mammograms, self-breast exams and finding out about family medical history, and any talk about prevention consists of diet and exercise. The public and media are not so much aware of the environmental links to breast cancer. I think if more attention and actions are focused in this area, we can eliminate illnesses related to environmental contamination.

What impact has ECO-Action made on my future?

My practicum experience at ECO-Action helped me to realize that in order to make changes, I have to be proactive and organize to gain the power to bring about expected change. An impact that I found valuable is how to engage communities and help them develop the organizing strategy and tactics to fight any form of environmental health injustice. In the future, I would like to devote a couple of years to being an elementary school teacher and spend a lifetime being an advocate for children's health. I hope to transfer my knowledge of the precautionary principle to my advocacy work in children's health. I am fortunate to work on the school community health initiative and promotion at ECO-Action. The Georgia School Environmental Checklist is a tool that we have been promoting to facilitate healthier school environments. This is something that I will definitely use and promote during my teaching career.

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HEALTH PROFESSIONALS TAKE THE PRECAUTIONARY PRINCIPLE CHALLENGE!

Alexia Chororos, ECO-Action Program/Development Associate

In our complex world we push the limits of knowledge, especially about the consequences of our own actions. How can stewards of public health and the environment make wise decisions in the face of scientific uncertainty? How can they challenge existing assumptions to make the connections that actually prevent harm to human health and the environment?

On November 8, 2006 a passionate group representing public health professionals from the U.S. Center for Disease Control (CDC), Federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), Morehouse School of Medicine, Georgia State University and others representing environmental advocacy groups, school districts, county Boards of Health, and the state of Georgia's departments of Agriculture, Natural Resources, Community Affairs, and Human Resources, gathered together to learn about the precautionary principle. The precautionary principle is at the core of new theory and decision-making process that link science to foresight, wisdom, and values. The precautionary principle focuses attention not on what type of environmental conditions we would settle for, but on how desirable environmental futures can be obtained. The precautionary principle is about taking action when we don't have all the science, but we do have the evidence of harm

Staff from the Georgia Division of Public Health, Chemical Hazards Program and ECO-Action teamed up to organize a panel of three nationally recognized experts in the field to speak on the need for a change in the way toxics are researched and regulated. Dr. Yomi Noibi of ECO-Action led the program with a synopsis of the precautionary principle and how health professionals can use this framework to prevent harm by changing the culture of their institutions. **"The American Public Health**

Association has issued a public statement in support of the precautionary principle and we need Georgia organizations to take a public position as well", said Dr. Noibi.

Next to the podium was Dr. Steven Gilbert, author of "A Small dose of Toxicology-the Health Effects of Common Chemicals". His powerful presentation discussed the failures of the current regulatory system of risk assessment. Dr. Gilbert has developed a precautionary assessment tool, which community groups can use to perform their own assessment based upon **precaution**. According to Dr. Gilbert, **"Risk assessment management assesses cost. But what is the cost to health? We need to look at the cost of treating health problems and the loss of quality of life. We can spend \$10,000 a year managing one person's asthma, but we are not looking to prevent that problem."**

Dr. Frank Bove of the CDC's Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry talked to the group about many of his personal experiences in conducting epidemiological studies. A strong believer in community involvement and public participation, Dr. Bove said, **"at several sites, community members were responsible for uncovering important threats to community health and were persistent in forcing health agencies to investigate these hazards."** He challenged public health practitioners to use the precautionary principle as a compass for health – to guide their decisions under uncertainty.

Many positive interactions and collaborations developed from this workshop. Participants broke into teams to discuss the specific issues that affect their agencies. Whether it is children's health, sustainable development, toxics prevention/reduction, or conservation, we know that educated and inspired public health professionals are going to take the precautionary challenge and advocate to bring about change.

Toxics Prevention & Reduction (& Conservation) Team and Georgia Action Team for Child Health (GATCH) were two working teams that evolved from this workshop. The two groups met in December, 2006 and we look forward to some strategic actions for precaution in 2007.

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In an effort to attract media attention and gain broader support, the Task Force continued with the planned town hall meeting that attracted more than 100 people to the Bethany United Methodist Church in Fayette County on Tuesday, December 5, 2006. To show solidarity, Task Force members wore custom designed T-shirts with the slogan-“**Neighbors Helping Neighbors Fight for the Health and Welfare of Our Community.**” The walls of the church were covered with signs that read: “*Mercaptan stinks But MOCAP Kills!*” and “*The smell may be gone But the Poison isn't.*”

Dennis Chase, expressed a deep concern at the town hall meeting when he said, “In all my experiences I've never seen state and federal agencies treat injured citizens as though they were the ones causing the problem. I can't imagine how upper management of those agencies can sleep at night.” Bill Edwards, the first Fulton County Commissioner to publicly demand closing down the plant stated, “**I meant it when I said the plant needed to close and I still mean it today. I think this [agreement] is the first step in closing it. This is more about the people than it is about PSC**”. He further stated, ‘ ... **I think the citizens Task Force, as they force the hand of Fulton County, should force the hand of EPA and EPD.**”

A recent Georgia Division of Public Health study suggests that there is no association between claimed illnesses and residents' exposure to MOCAP and propyl mercaptan. Frank Bove, an epidemiologist with the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR)/Center for Disease Control (CDC) and an ECO-Action board member stated, “ ...*My position is that medical or exposure testing is unnecessary and unhelpful to the community, public health, or to advance the science. ... it is unnecessary to determine if symptoms are related to the spill and odors. There is ample evidence that odors of this kind are associated with the kinds of symptoms being reported. We know that exposures to N-propyl mercaptan and to Ethoprop cause irritant symptoms such as those being reported. So no study is needed, and there is no good reason to doubt the community reports of headache, burning eyes, cough or sore throat, nausea or vomiting, difficulty breathing, nosebleed, etc*”.

The Task Force had not only influenced the Commission to deny renewal of PSC's discharge permit, they had invoked the precautionary principle-calling on their commissioners to take precautionary action in the face of existing evidence and not wait for proof. The residents' advocacy was able to shift the burden of proof onto those who pollute like PSC and away from those who are exposed such as the residents of South Fulton and Fayette County. Task Force members Dennis Chase and K. Sierra Leone attended ECO-Action's Grassroots Environmental Network Forum on the Precautionary Principle. From this forum, Task Force members learned how to apply the precautionary principle to their organizing. *When decision makers are forced to apply the precautionary principle in protecting human health and the environment, the power of precaution is manifested. Simply put, the power of precaution prevents harm to human health and the environment in a genuine participatory democratic process.*

There were many lessons learned by Task Force members, which will serve them well as they move forward with their cause. For example, the Task Force learned to celebrate victory with a victory party held on December 22nd. Also, they learned that our regulatory agencies generally do not serve the interest of public and environmental health unless they are forced to. Lastly, they learned the organizing mantra “Keep their eyes on the prize” which for the South Fulton and Fayette County Community Task Force is to permanently shut down PSC. **This victory deepened the confidence of Task Force members and reaffirmed their citizen power as they continue their struggle to officially shut down PSC.** We congratulate this group for making a difference.

ATHENS, GEORGIA - DUNLAP ROAD COMMUNITY WALKS FOR AWARENESS

By Kimberly Austin, ECO-Action Intern,
Georgia State University Institute of Public Health

Traffic on Dunlap Road in Athens, Georgia came to a halt Saturday morning, September 9, as the Dunlap Road Community and its supporters walked alongside the Athens-Clarke County (ACC) Landfill. The event appropriately titled "Making the Link" was a walk to highlight awareness of the linkage between environmental conditions and community health. Folks residing in The Dunlap Road Community are routinely exposed to various toxic emissions from its neighbor, the 400-acre ACC landfill. Typical chemicals found at landfills include volatile organic compounds, pesticides, and heavy metals – all linked to adverse health effects.

Saturday morning was an opportunity for the community to share and learn with others while promoting the precautionary principle- calling for action to prevent harm to health where there is credible evidence but no scientific proof of causation. The crowd of more than fifty was comprised of men and women, ranging from young to older residents. Children of the neighborhood zipped up and down the road during the one-mile walk to the Oglethorpe county line, while the adults chatted about happenings in the community. Conversations took a serious turn with discussions on health concerns due to living near the ACC landfill. Each house and its dwellers had their own story. Charles Nash, a long time resident and leader in the community, recalled times when people grew ill after contact with water contaminated by waste in the landfill. He also recounted several deaths suspected to be cancer related. ***There were so many incidences in the neighborhood that a link between their poor health and the community environment seems to definitely exist despite the lack of a long-term "scientific study". The people who live there day in and day out know that something is wrong.***

Many residents continue to endure exposure to toxics emitted from the ACC landfill, like Ms Clara Clarke who has been a resident for over seventy years. But what about the Dunlap Road children? Are they more at risk of cancers and respiratory illnesses, like asthma because they are growing up by a landfill? Studies indicate that the health and well being of such children may be at a disadvantage and there is mounting evidence that suggests mothers living near



Walking for Environmental awareness in Athens, Clark County.

some landfills have a higher rate of low weight babies and other adverse birth outcomes than mothers living farther away from landfill sites. The vibrant, confident, friendly and beautiful kids of Dunlap Road could have fallen victim to the toxicants of the landfill while their mothers were pregnant. Now they need to be protected along with the rest of the community and future generations.

Neighborhoods like Dunlap Road are motivated to make the link between possible threatening environmental conditions and the health of their residents thanks to the efforts of groups with diverse backgrounds like The Northeast Georgia Children's Environmental Health Coalition, The Billups Grove Baptist Church, and Micah's Mission, who are collaborating and organizing with communities to achieve change in the way toxics are regulated. ECO-Action was instrumental in getting the Northeast Georgia Children's Environmental Health Coalition and other groups in Athens/Clarke County to embrace the precautionary principle in their vision and mission.

Looking forward the community hopes to hold the "Making the Link" walk annually until the ACC landfill is better monitored by state and federal government or moved to another site that has less impact on people and the environment. Currently, the Dunlap Road Community and its supporters are also organizing to express the need for precautionary actions as Northeast Georgia looks to options in increasing its capacity for solid waste management. To help this community or for more information please contact ECO-Action at contactus@eco-act.org.

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Thursday, January 25, 2007: Energy at the Crossroads Tour, This Southeast tour stops in Atlanta to open minds and hearts to a safe, clean, and responsible energy future through humor, fun, and involvement. Admission is free. There will be a 11am press conference at the State Capitol Building and a public forum from 7-9 pm at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation.

Other tour stops in Georgia are:
Savannah-Tuesday, January 23rd
Athens-Wednesday, January 24th

For more information contact the Canary Coalition at 828-631-3447 or visit www.energyatthecrossroadstour.org.

Wednesday- Sunday, June 27- July 1, 2007: United States Social Forum (USSF), Community organizers, NGO representatives, and social movements will gather for the first ever US Social Forum that will be held in Atlanta, Georgia. USSF is a 5-day conference filled with dialogues, workshops, debates, marches, rallies, and cultural events. ECO-Action is involved in the leadership of the Health, Healing, and Environmental Justice Fair at USSF. For further information and to register visit <http://www.ussf2007.org/>.

Community Builders Leadership Institute (CBLI), a series of professional development workshops for consultants and leaders in Georgia communities between March and August 2007. The National Community Development Institute (NCDI) is offering the CBLI curriculum, which is focused on the orientation of the leader as a culturally based change agent in the transformation of individuals, communities, and organizations. The purpose of CBLI is to train a cadre of individuals who can provide culturally based technical support and training services to build capacity for social change in communities of color.

ECO-Action has joined this effort as a local nonprofit sponsor and will provide logistical support and assistance in hosting the training in Atlanta and Savannah or Augusta. The Southern Partners Fund has agreed to co-sponsor the institute by providing tuition, travel, and accommodation support to former and existing grantees.

Who: The program is open to experienced individuals who are seeking to integrate a culturally based approach to their work and are interested in networking with others seeking this approach. Participants engage in one institute orientation and four, full day sessions over two consecutive months (two days each month). *Participants are expected to attend an orientation dinner and all four days of the CBLI.* Certificates of completion will be awarded to eligible participants.

Tuition: Tuition is \$75 per training day or \$300 per participant. Institutes are designed to accommodate up to 20 participants. *Date and location: To be announced.*

Registration: Please contact ECO-Action at 404-584-6499 or yomi@eco-act.org for more information and to register.

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