

Jacksonville group protests incineration with vigil at Capitol

BY WARD PINCUS
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Members of a Jacksonville environmental group held a vigil Saturday night on the state Capitol steps to protest the proposed incineration of toxic waste in their city.

About 45 members of Jacksonville Environmental Network met for the sunset vigil punctuated with prayer, patriotic songs and appeals to Gov. Bill Clinton to block the burning.

"We have come here to ask God to make Governor Clinton stop the burning, to set a national precedent against incineration," said Claudette Hazlett, a group board member.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has allocated \$2 million for the incineration of 30,000 drums of dioxin-laced chemicals stored at Vertac Chemical Inc.

The waste is to be burned this fall at the plant site, which is adjacent to residential subdivisions and Little Rock Air Force Base.

Dioxin is a byproduct of the manufacture of herbicides, and is suspected of causing cancer in humans.

Early in Saturday's pro-

gram, Hazlett began to cry as she called for a moment of silent prayer she said was requested by airmen at the base.

"They are not allowed to voice objection to the burning because they fear repercussions and so they asked for a special prayer," Hazlett said later.

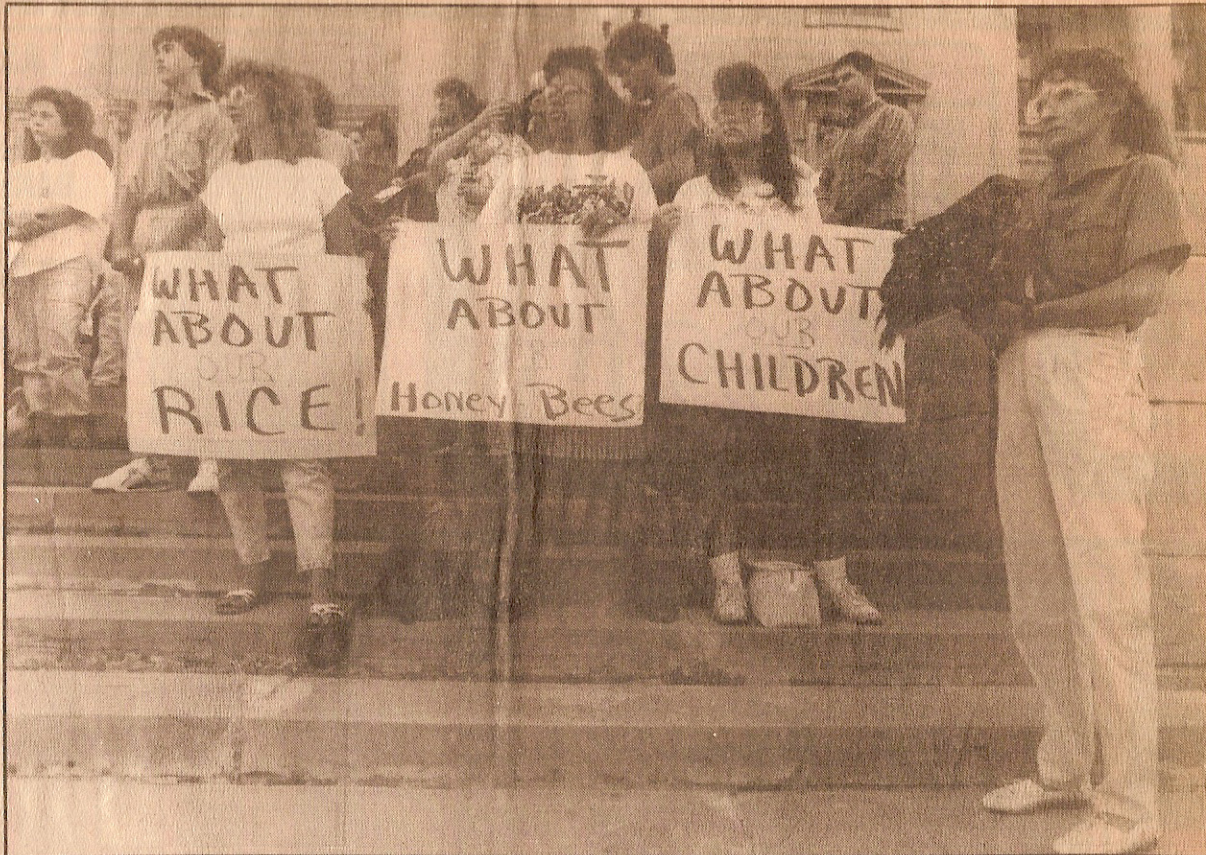
Environmental groups and concerned citizens have met several times this year to discuss the burning with representatives of the EPA, the state Department of Pollution Control and Ecology and MRK Incineration of Zachary, La., the private company hired to burn the waste.

The groups doubt that the incineration so close to their neighborhoods will not harm residents' health.

"In meetings with government people, they were not giving us straight, correct information about the situation," Jacksonville resident Leatha McMahan said at the vigil.

She and others hoped Saturday's vigil might have some effect toward change.

"In some small way maybe we can open the eyes of the governor and the officials involved," McMahan said.



Arkansas Democrat Robert Poole

WHAT ABOUT US? A group of Jacksonville residents and environmentalists gather on the Capitol steps late Saturday to protest this fall's proposed burning of toxic

wastes in the Pulaski County town. While many demonstrators carried placards, Cindy Westra (right) brought a pet owl to the event.

"We want Governor Clinton to know we are serious. ... We hope to make Governor Clinton listen to us and by stopping the burning, give us something to make us proud of the Natural State," Hazlett said.

The founder of Back to Nature Wildlife Inc., who is trying to start a chapter of the organization in Arkansas, compared

Arkansas with Alaska.

"In Alaska they have sued all responsible parties" in the Prince William Sound oil tanker spill, said Cindy Westra of Orlando, Fla.

"Arkansas is a state with equal beauty, with a motto as the Natural State. But it is fast becoming known as the Chemical State," she said as she held

a pet owl she said was almost killed by toxic chemicals.

JEN is a coalition made up of the Jacksonville chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the Organization of Concerned Citizens, and People Against a Chemically Contaminated Environment.