

Jacksonville's toxins endanger lives

A Voices letter from
CYNTHIA A. WESTRA
Jacksonville

In March 1989 the nation watched in horror as an entire ecosystem became contaminated with crude oil. Anger and concern were expressed by the American people. Response by industry and concerned citizens enabled a massive rescue and clean-up effort to be undertaken.

On April 7, I and four associates landed in Alaska to assist the rescue efforts. As wildlife rehabilitators, this tragedy deeply affected us.

None of us were prepared for the magnitude of agony and death we saw and experienced. Not one of us could hold back the tears as we tried desperately to save these animals' lives.

I saw an entire wildlife habitat trashed out, poisoned and covered with a visible death. I saw our government, corporations, industry and people working hand in hand to clean up this deadly mess. I saw a massive effort undertaken to save that environment. Exxon spent \$34 million just in wildlife rehabilitation.

There are no words to de-

scribe the emotions felt when watching an animal die from poisoning. Between violent convulsions, bloodshot eyes stare off in space as if to ask their creator why. While their bodies thrash about in seizures, blood flows from their nose, mouth and rectum as the toxin chemicals literally eat their insides out.

In August 1989, I arrived in Jacksonville, Ark., my home for the next year. What I saw in Alaska was God's way of preparing me for what I was to see here.

For the past 40 years, Jacksonville's environment has been chemically contaminated. Chemicals have contaminated every ditch, creek and waterway in an 80-mile area, draining to the Mississippi Delta.

The EPA, politicians and industry are playing a game here, and life is the stake. I have great admiration and respect for the governor of Alaska. He threatened industry with the pipeline shutdown and demanded environmental clean-up.

Helping the responsible parties get out of their responsibilities and hiding how

severely contaminated this "Natural State" is? Ignoring the fact that the people and wildlife here are chemically contaminated?

High rates of cancer, central nervous system disorders, seizures, miscarriages, sudden infant deaths, birth defects, mental illness and death are a common occurrence here. Suffering with the human population are the wildlife. They are forced daily to feed and drink in this chemically contaminated environment.

Why? Out of sight, out of mind, but that doesn't work here. If the people could see these chemicals coating their environment the same as the oil coated the Sound, maybe then there would be an environmental clean-up.

Until that happens, our food chain will continue to be contaminated as these waters continue to irrigate the fields and our meat sources drink from these waters.

In February, 30,000 barrels of contaminated wastes will be incinerated here in town. Incineration will take place 24 hours a day for nine months. Too bad the people don't realize that a bomb will be explod-

ing over them, a bomb whose fallout will be carried far over the air currents like the radiation of Chernobyl.

Jacksonville is the No. 1 spot in the United States for environmental concern, No. 1 for uncontrolled contamination and No. 1 for no environmental clean-up. Why?

Political games have left us without our legal right to a technical adviser. Why? Fear that a technical adviser for the people will alert them to the fact of how badly contaminated this area is.

There is no technical adviser to monitor the incineration company that has never incinerated before. How can this happen? We have the highest concentration of the deadliest manmade substance known - dioxin - found anywhere.

I thought we lived in a country where citizens have the right to vote. When the Jacksonville population voted against incineration, they were told that their vote doesn't count. Why?

Prince William Sound's tragedy was a visible message to mankind. Humanity must awaken to the facts of what is happening before it's too late.