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HEADLINE: NEIGHBORS SEEKING PROOF OF POLLUTION

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BODY:

Some Lower Algiers residents say they are certain that soot and chemicals carried across the Mississippi River from the Chalmette Refinery have damaged their roofs, their cars and their health. Now they are looking for proof.

A small group of Cut Off residents met with an environmental activist July 24 to discuss a technique for catching **air** samples during periods when they see or smell soot or sulfur. The **air** sampling can back up vague complaints with hard evidence, said Anne Rolfes of the Louisiana **Bucket Brigade**, a program of the national Communities for a Better Environment.

"You get much better response from a company when you have evidence like this," Rolfes said.

Rolfes has set up similar air-sampling programs for residents near refineries in Norco, Mossville and Convent. Her nonprofit group is offering to pay for the special bucket and for analysis of the samples. Last year, the Condea Vista chemical plant was fined after a Westlake resident collected tainted air with one of the buckets.

The buckets could help capture elusive but harmful emissions, said Sidney Torres, a Chalmette lawyer who has sued local chemical plants. "People will smell it and react to it, call (the Department of Environmental Quality), and by the time they get down there, it may clear up. This may be a way to capture the evidence."

During Monday's meeting, residents blamed the refinery for sinus problems and itchy rashes on their necks, legs and arms. They alluded to other residents who have developed cancer and black lung disease, though they said no studies had been done to connect the diseases to the refinery. And they said that after flares from the refinery send soot into the air, it settles on their roofs and cars, corroding tile and paint jobs.

"It's an ongoing and constant thing," said Melanie Williams, who added that she suffers from shortness of breath and other health problems since her recent return to the neighborhood.

The residents said they had shared in a settlement after a 1990 refinery fire that rained debris over neighborhoods. But they said the 1996 awards, at most a few hundred dollars, were not enough. Asked if her \$165 settlement compensated for her problems, Gaynell Collins said, "My roof? My car? My eyes? My skin?"

Collins said she has had to replace her roof at least three times in 30 years because of corrosion.

Several other lawsuits against refineries are pending on behalf of Algiers and St. Bernard Parish residents, Torres said. The suits allege damage both from specific flares and ongoing pollution, he said.

Conditions have improved somewhat in the past few years, said Eloise Williams, a lifelong neighborhood resident who organized the meeting. "They have done something, or we wouldn't be able to sit here with this wind blowing. ... My momma would say, 'Don't stay out there too long. Hurry up and go inside,' " Williams said.

Williams said she wants the refinery to hire doctors to assess residents' problems. "They may be trying (to improve), but I'm saying they still need (to compensate) people. The sickness doesn't go away."

Chalmette Refinery spokesman Derrick Hinmon said refinery officials "welcome the results of the sampling and look forward to discussion of the information with (residents)." But he said tainted air could come from other sources such as passing ships or other riverfront industries. Hinmon said refinery officials do their own air sampling when the refinery is identified as the source of a problem.

As for the health problems, Hinmon said, "With the exception of (a couple of) notable incidents, we generally don't determine that things would cause these long-term health effects." The refinery has a complaint line and a citizens advisory council, of which Eloise Williams is a member, Hinmon said.

Also at the meeting was Von Kemedi, a visitor from Nigeria who compared Algiers residents' problems to the struggles in his homeland. Residents of the oil-rich but impoverished Niger Delta have been plagued by exploding pipelines, large oil spills and a repressive response to activism. "We must stand together and walk firm to stop these things," Kemedi said.

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