

Health Problems Still Plague Arkansas Residents Near ExxonMobil Tar Sands Spill

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It's been a warm, rain-soaked summer in the small lakeside community of Mayflower, a sleepy residential town north of Little Rock famous for its bluegill and bass fishing in nearby Lake Conway.

But for some folks here, the rain has brought an unpleasant reminder that Mayflower is not the same picture-postcard community it once was. Instead, its residents say they are **still suffering health effects** from an estimated 5,000 barrels of tar sands crude that burst from an ExxonMobil pipeline on March 29th and poured through a residential neighborhood. The black viscous oil then flowed into culverts and a creek by the town shopping center, finally draining into a marshy area of the lake where much of it remains buried in sediment. Residents say heavy rains cause the oil to leak out into a cove that drains into the lake.



Cleanup operations in Mayflower, April, 2013 Photo: Rocky Kistner/NRDC

Although locals say cleanup work in the marshy cove has dropped off significantly, they say they can still smell the sickly sweet odor of crude after it rains. Some still complain of health problems like headaches, nausea and vomiting that have plagued families near the cove since the end of March.

“I’m still having problems breathing,” says Sherry Appleman, who lives near the oil-soaked cove on the lake and lost her husband to cancer in June, a condition she believes was made worse by the poisonous spill five months ago. She says she’s battled headaches and asthma like conditions since the tarry crude invaded her once-pristine Arkansas lakeside environment five months ago. “Our health conditions have gotten worse, people with cancer have gotten worse instead of getting better. . . .the local health department says everything’s normal, but they’re just saying what Exxon wants them to say.”



Mayflower resident Sherry Appleman on Lake Conway Photo: Rocky Kistner/NRDC

Although state authorities say the **oil has not gotten into the main body of Lake Conway**, Appleman -- like many who live on the lake -- believe it has. She says she's seen oil-contaminated water in ditches that drain from the contaminated cove area and empty into the lake with her own eyes. "The oil has to be in the lake, everyone knows it is, there's no way they can keep it from out of the lake with the flash floods we've had recently."

Louisiana-based toxicologist and chemist **Wilma Subra** -- who has studied health exposures in the BP oil spill -- has been following health problems in Mayflower that continue to plague residents. She says rainfall can flush the oil out of the sediment, allowing volatile and toxic chemicals to off-gas into the air. "Rainfall events can cause the crude oil to float to the surface and cause health effects, it's typical of what can occur at waste sites like these," Subra says. "They should have evacuated more of the population to stop the exposure."

For Genieve Long, a mother of four young children who lives near the oily cove, it's been a recurring nightmare of health problems since the black goo settled in the marsh area nearby. This is what she posted on the Facebook site Mayflower Arkansas Oil spill recently:

I hear the air boats in the cove today. As they work in the cove it stirs up the tar sands from the bottom and then the chemicals rise into the air. I live very close to that cove and I can tell you since the last week when it rained a lot. I have been sick throwing up, abdominal pains, headaches, dizzy and tired. I slept for 14 hours yesterday due to not feeling well. My children were coughing, wheezing, and had headaches also. We closed up the house and turned on our air purifier. After a few hours of it running you could actually see a oily residue over the top of the water.

[Watch the video of my interview with Genieve Long, who says her family continues to experience health problems from tar sands oil that spilled near her home.](#)

Long, who **traveled to Washington** last May to deliver a message to the State Department to stop the Keystone XL tar sands pipeline, says conditions near the site have continued to make her family sick. "We've had vomiting, abdominal pain, migraines and respiratory problems. My five-year-old has fevers and joint pain. The doctors have done blood tests but don't know what's going on....Exxon has refused to pay medical claims because they say the air quality is fine."

State and federal agencies that monitor air and water contaminants around the spill say the environment is safe, although **more testing continues**. But many locals don't believe it. Lake side resident Marianne Wyckoff also continues to experience headaches after it rains. "You can still smell it at times and you can see the oil coming up in the cove after it rains....the lily pads are all dead and wilted." She says she's listed her property because she doesn't want to be around it, but she's not optimistic about attracting any buyers.



The oil-contaminated cove on Lake Conway Photo: Rocky Kistner/NRDC

That's also a problem for people who live near the source of the spill less than a mile from the lake, where Exxon's Pegasus pipeline ruptured and poured out of a 22-ft gash near the Northwoods subdivision, causing the gusher of Canadian tar sands oil that flowed through the suburban neighborhood.

Ann Jarrell lives about 350 yards from blowout site behind Northwoods. She complains of ongoing health problems, including headaches, nausea and respiratory ailments, and says her daughter suffered seizure-like conditions after cutting the grass, while her grandson has been put on an inhaler. Jarrell says her doctor has told her not to return to her house because of the health problems they continue to experience; when Jarrell spoke to a doctor with the Arkansas health department, she reports she was referred her back to her primary physician.



Ann Jarrell's grandson Logan Photo: courtesy Ann Jarrell

“We need help and we’re being ignored,” Jarrell says. “They should have evacuated a larger area...I’ve never been so sick. When my doctor told me don’t go back to the house, my friends picked up my clothes and medicine and my dog.”

Jarrell says she’s not sure what to do now. Although she considers herself lucky to be able to stay with a friend, she says she can’t afford to buy another place. “I can’t sell my house when there’s a big pipeline sign right by my house.”

Amber Bartlett’s family lives in one of the 22 Northwoods subdivision homes that were evacuated after the stream of black tar sands oil poured down her street. She and most of the families that were evacuated have refused to return to their homes. Bartlett says they have been told they will stop receiving any money for temporary housing on September 15, even though cleanup work continues in the neighborhood. “It seems like they are trying to force us back into our homes...I told them if you were in my shoes, would you let your kids back in the neighborhood knowing it’s possible they could get sick at some point?”

Bartlett and her husband and four kids are now living in a rented trailer, and she says they not happy with their ongoing negotiations with Exxon about how they will be compensated for their inconvenience and damage to their home. “In the beginning, we were on Exxon’s side in terms of how we were being treated,” she says. “But now it feels like they are trying to get rid of us...we will stand our ground for what we feel we deserve.”



Amber Bartlett's family still has not moved back to their home. Above: Cleanup workers in Northwoods in April. Photos: Rocky Kistner/NRDC

Bartlett also understands the complaints by people who live by the lake and in other areas of Mayflower who have received far less attention and compensation from Exxon to date. “I feel like people need to be taken care of here....It’s ridiculous to say the oil has not gotten into the lake.”

Recent reports of health complaints have been highlighted in a collaborative series of stories by the *Arkansas Times* and *InsideClimate News*, but the major media has largely ignored the health problems in Mayflower, including a *recent New York Times report* about tar sands spills in Mayflower and along Michigan’s Kalamazoo River three years ago.

But locals like April Lane of the *Faulkner County Citizens Advisory Group* say they will keep pushing officials for greater health information and analysis, pressing political leaders and rallying members of the community for increased resources and support. “We need expert doctors to come here and study what are the actual effects in the community,” Lane says, who is advocating for a health survey of local complaints. “Remediation is not sufficient. They’re just burying the oil and leaving it in the cove. The compounds are evaporating into the atmosphere and we are seeing people with recurring exposures.”

Lane and others are helping organize another *town hall meeting* in nearby Maumelle on Saturday Aug. 31. It likely will be attended by many of the same residents who came together in the first community meeting four months ago, people still suffering from health symptoms and nagging questions about the torrent of toxic tar sands oil that poured out of the ground and embedded in their community, changing their lives in ways they never imagined.