

## What's Killing LaBelle, PA?

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When you drive into LaBelle, PA, you might miss it for the view. The steep streets wind around trees turned, this time of year, into bold yellows and oranges. Houses line the Monongahela River on small lots left over from the peak of the town's coal mining days. A rustic ferry will take you across the river for a few dollars.

Yma Smith was born in LaBelle and owns the land on which she was raised. She and her husband Rudy built their house fifteen years ago. Photos of family members line their living room walls. They grow vegetables out back and have an above-ground swimming pool. Much of her family still lives down the street.

“I've lived here all my life. LaBelle's the only place I know.”

But for this close-knit rural community, there is just one problem: everyone is dying.

### **“We’re Slowly Being Killed Out Here”**

Yma suffers from debilitating migraines, fatigue and a respiratory disorder. Her eyes are swollen and she speaks with a raspy voice. “Sometimes,” she says, “my sinuses hurt so bad I feel like somebody’s sticking a knife in my eye.”

Recently her husband Rudy’s kidneys both failed at the same time. He is currently on dialysis. They raise a 6-year-old nephew named Jamar who has a chronic cough and uses an inhaler for regular breathing.

“It makes me sad, because I worry,” Smith says. “I worry about him. And I worry about my friends.”

Their neighbor Sonny Markish is currently on chemotherapy, having recently been operated on for colon cancer. He has also developed asthma in the last few years. His wife Colleen is in remission after battling kidney cancer. She now lives with an additional six inches on one side of her body because of how the doctors had to put her kidney back in.

Sonny and Colleen have lost six pets, all to mouth cancer. Down the road, one woman lost 5 out of 6 pet birds to respiratory disorders.

Among the many types of cancer affecting the town, cancer of the eyes, nose and brain appear to be common – a stunning problem considering the rates for such cancer in other communities.

A family with both mother and son currently battling cancer did the math: as far as they could tell, in the last 5 years, 38 people have died of cancer in a town of 200 people.

Smith’s cousin Lenora claims to be the type of person who “never gets sick.” Now months of fatigue and respiratory problems have made her anxious. “We’re slowly being killed out here,” she asserts from behind a seemingly very dirty white picket fence.

### **Toxic Dust**

LaBelle sits at the bottom of a big hill – the highest point in the area – on which there used to be a coal mine. Now the mine has been converted into a coal ash disposal site.

Coal ash is a waste product of coal combustion. Three coal plants in total send their coal ash on barges down the Monongahela River to LaBelle, where trucks then load the ash and drive it up to the disposal site.

As a minefill site, the area does not have any regulations. Trucks take the ash off of barges on the river and drag it up to the dump at the top of the hill without covering the ash with tarps. Because they are uncovered, the dust blows everywhere. From the top of the hill, the dust can become airborne and fill the town.

“You should be here on a nice windy day,” says Kim Kuklish. “It was real windy one day and we were out here on the porch and there was a white haze going through the yard, and in the

sunlight you could see it, it was shiny. After it was done, my porch was covered in it. When we took a shower it was mostly gray soot that came off our bodies.”

But the coal ash is more dangerous than just any soot. All coal contains trace amounts of arsenic, cadmium, lead, selenium, and other metals. Once the coal burns during the combustion process, what is left in the ash is a much higher concentration of the pollutants. The airborne fly ash covering LaBelle is no exception.

The ash coats any items left outside and, after a short time, pits them and destroys their exterior. Gutters, cars, doghouses, lawn furniture, and white picket fences all look dirty from the gray ash after only a few months or even weeks.

Smith says that it is impossible to keep white clothes from looking dingy. She is embarrassed to show people her home, which is pitted on the outside and looks dirty, even though scrubbing it will not make it clean again. Her roof, which was under warranty, had to be replaced because it eventually crumbled under a coating of toxic ash.

“If it did this to my roof and I’m out there every day breathing it in, what is it doing to my insides?”

#### **“We Don’t Drink the Water”**

Because the dump site is also unlined, the coal ash can leach into the groundwater. According to Lisa Widawsky of the Environmental Integrity Project (EIP), the groundwater in LaBelle has tested above state levels in manganese, aluminum, and lead, among other metals.

The surface water might be even more problematic. It contains high levels of arsenic – a known carcinogen – along with lead, mercury, and aluminum, including the streams near where people and animals live.

Says Widawsky, “These are not things you want in your drinking water. These are not things you want in your air. These are not things you want in the surface water your children are playing in and your animals are drinking.”

Smith and many other residents refuse to drink the water in LaBelle. Smith spends \$60-\$80 each month on bottled water for cooking, drinking, and serving to her dog. “It’s bad enough we have to bathe in it,” she says.

Widawsky also worries that, because LaBelle residents hunt for food, they are likely eating animals that have been drinking water contaminated with arsenic, which bioaccumulates. This would mean many residents could potentially breathe, eat, and drink toxic substances at all times.

“This is a very scary prospect for the people that live near this site that have limited ability to move out.”

Many residents of LaBelle are handicapped and financially struggling. While they do not want to move in the first place, they also do not see how moving would be possible. Because of the ash, property values have plummeted, and moving expenses alone cause residents to give up on the idea. Most would prefer to see the coal ash site become regulated and safe so that they can stay on their land.

“If they continue without stopping, we’ll be forced to leave,” Smith says. “LaBelle’s the only place I’ve known. Don’t send me away. I worked hard to get what I’ve got. I don’t call it much, but I call it my home.”

#### **“I Saw Clouds of That Stuff Fill the Whole Valley”**

Gary Kuklish was a coal miner for 24 years. Like many residents in and around LaBelle, he has no desire to hurt the coal industry or see it go under. But his mining experience has also helped him to recognize the dangers of coal ash and begin to take a stand.

Kuklish recounts an abnormally dry day in December of last year,. “I saw clouds of that stuff fill the whole valley. I knew what it was – everyone in this community knew what it was. When you see this valley filled with fugitive dust, and you can’t see across the river, and you’re choking for three days, that’s enough for me.”

Kuklish filed a petition signed by the community. That’s when Lisa Marcucci stepped in.

Marcucci, a community outreach coordinator with EIP, found the petition in a public file and contacted Kuklish. They began putting together a fight for better regulations in and around the coal ash dump site.

They have asked and continue to ask that the EPA classify all coal ash as special waste, including minefill sites like LaBelle, under Subtitle C of the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act (RCRA) – a regulation the EPA is currently considering.

The potential classification worries coal ash recycling companies in particular, who use coal ash in drywall and concrete and who fear the term “hazardous” will stigmatize their products and hurt the industry.

But residents of LaBelle are more concerned about their health than the effects the ruling might have on the economy. “I am pro-business,” says one resident currently battling cancer. “I believe in working for a living. But who the hell has the right to make a living making me sick?”

#### **A Citizen Inspection**

Earlier this year, residents filed a request for an inspection of the site at LaBelle. They sent a letter to the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), and under federal mining law, the state and the site’s operator had to comply.

They set the date for the inspection a month ahead – Thursday, October 28. DEP representatives agreed to attend, along with select citizens and attorneys from EIP and Matt Canastrale, Inc., which operates the LaBelle site.

Residents planned a community meeting for the evening of the 28th to discuss the findings. They contacted radio stations and passed out flyers to help the surrounding area become aware of what is happening in LaBelle and the nearby waterways.

One week before the meeting, the attorney for Matt Canastrale, Inc., informed the group that he would not be able to attend on the decided date and that the inspection would have to be postponed.

“It’s very frustrating,” says Marcucci, “because we feel as though we have done everything that the law requires. We’ve gone through the process; we’ve been very patient, very professional about it. We all agreed on this and everybody was notified 30 days in advance. Couldn’t he have sent someone else to cover his duties that day on the site?”

The inspection has been rescheduled for November 8, although Marcucci claims the operating company wanted even more time. Residents fear that the postponement might allow the company to clean up before the inspection, preventing them from seeing the site in its normal condition.

Marcucci does not allege that the operator intends to do such a thing, but, she says, “I don’t necessarily feel the urgency of protecting people is there.”

Smith interprets the action as one more statement by the coal ash industry to citizens like her in LaBelle. “They think we’re nothing. LaBelle’s nothing. You know, we want to live. We don’t want to die.”

“The lady on the corner told me, ‘My husband used to say that the dust was going to kill us all one day.’ He died a couple of months ago.”