

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515-2402

March 14, 2016

The Honorable Gina McCarthy
The Office of the Administrator, 1101A
Environmental Protection Agency
1200 Pennsylvania Avenue NW
Washington, D.C. 20460

**Re: Environmental Hazards in Eastern Heights Neighborhood of Grenada,
Mississippi**

Dear Administrator McCarthy:

I am writing to draw your attention to a very important and gravely concerning issue currently happening to citizens in Grenada County, Mississippi. For years, the residents of the Eastern Heights neighborhood in the City of Grenada have suffered from life-threatening/deadly illnesses, such as cancer and kidney disease, that have shaken the foundation of almost every home in the neighborhood. An alarming 68 cases of cancer out of the 225 residents have been identified. The common thread of all of these cases of cancer and other illnesses in this community is that the neighborhood is situated in close proximity to the former Grenada Manufacturing site and has seemingly been exposed to the contaminants within the sub-surface soils in the neighborhood.

Contamination has been identified in the air, soil and groundwater within and adjacent to the Eastern Heights neighborhood. There has been initial testing by both private companies and government agencies and at the very least, it has been confirmed that the pathway from the Grenada Manufacturing site to the nearby neighborhood has tested positive for trichloroethene (TCE) and other solvents from the runoff of the plant and/or the improper dumping from the plant. From what I have seen, it is hard for me not to believe that the contaminants in the neighborhood are not the direct result of the past and present health hazards in the area.

The citizens in the community have become outraged by the response, or lack thereof, from government agencies, including the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). While the EPA has been tasked with protecting the health and welfare of the citizens it serves, to this point, it has only presented unclear and inconsistent findings. I am asking that your agency perform a full, transparent, and emergent investigation of this matter, meet with my office to discuss the plan for moving forward, and immediately do all that is within your power to make sure that the citizens of Grenada County no longer have this clear and present health and safety threat.

This is not a new problem. The EPA (through Region 4) has known about the problem in the neighborhood since 1993. However, until 2015, the agency denied that a problem existed. The problem would have never come to light if the residents would have not grown tired and weary of watching loved ones die, without any explanation. Extensive research into the documents located at the federal and state regulators' offices and interviews with hundreds of workers and residents over a year's time have shed more light into the fraudulent conduct of past facility operators than almost 25 years of monitoring conducted by the EPA. If what have been shown is true and accurate, it is hard not to say that the EPA has failed my constituents with deadly results.

The Eastern Heights neighborhood –a predominantly African-American neighborhood – comprised of individuals who work hard and take pride in the community in which they live has been ravaged by disease over the past quarter century. The neighborhood is located across the railroad tracks from a manufacturing facility that for decades allowed known carcinogens to be discharged in the air that was vented toward the neighborhood, and illegally dumped known carcinogens that penetrated the soil into the ground water that eventually traveled underneath many of the homes in Eastern Heights. The known carcinogens are familiar to cases involving environmental hazards including *hexavalent chromium*, which devastated Hinkley, CA (which was at the center of the case made famous by Erin Brockovich). The other chemical, *trichloroethene* (commonly known as "TCE") wreaked havoc on over 100,000 marines that were stationed at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina. It is unconscionable that my constituents are still being exposed and there are no measures in place to prevent it after almost 25 years.

For decades, Region 4 of the EPA has denied that any of the chemicals penetrated the neighborhood and no protective measures were put in place to protect the residents. However, a PRB (permeable reactive barrier) was put into place in order to protect the fish that resided in the creek that bordered the facility's property on the west. This PRB was installed around 2006 approximately 13 years after the entity and EPA were made aware that contamination was moving into the neighborhood, still nothing was done to protect them.

Additionally, there is a great deal of documentation that suggests that the EPA has been concerned about this issue but still failed to do anything about it. In a memorandum produced by the EPA and addressing the concerns of resident Viola Adams, EPA's David Jenkins interpreted the data that he had received and stated, "There are no presentations in this report which would help you convince management or the public that the EPA is performing its responsibilities at this site." In the next paragraph, he states, "The report does not show the remedial measures are protecting human health and the environment." No follow up calls by the EPA were ever made to Mrs. Adams to let her know that her previous concerns were well founded and furthermore no action was taken. This is just one example of myriad cases of what seem to be negligent oversight or avoidance by EPA.

Vapor testing in the homes began in September 2015. The vapor testing established a completed pathway from the groundwater into the homes through the slab at 3 to 5 times the screening levels. In addition, ambient (outside) air samples were conducted at different locations throughout the neighborhood, including the playground, and all samples were several times higher than the screening levels. Statements from former workers and a soil sample confirm that

portions of the Eastern Heights neighborhood were used as a dump. Even though, the contaminants that have been impacting the health and welfare of the residents of Eastern Heights for over four decades have been identified in the homes, the ground water, the soil, and the outside air of the residents, the EPA has taken no action to alleviate the problem.

Despite a toxicologist's report that identifies that the number of cancers in Eastern Heights may exceed almost 3 times the national average, there seems to be little or no concern for assisting the individuals in the neighborhood. This is very troubling because the pathway of a known carcinogen has been established and the impact of the carcinogen has far exceeded national averages.

Since the site came under the supervision of the EPA in 1992, nothing has been done to protect the health and welfare of the residents of Eastern Heights. To the contrary it seems that the EPA has done everything feasible to assist the entities that have destroyed the health and welfare of the citizens of Eastern Heights and damaged vast amounts of the natural resources of the State of Mississippi.

Furthermore, my office is gathering information from former management, former workers, and former union representatives in attempts to investigate the harmful working conditions that the workforce was subjected to for decades. Already my office is able to substantiate fraudulent practices orchestrated by previous operators of the facility in connection with Occupational Health and Safety Administration (OSHA) evaluations conducted at the facility. These fraudulent practices hid the severity of the exposure from OSHA and from a predominantly African-American workforce to numerous known carcinogens.

In order to assist my constituents and reduce the high likelihood of any further embarrassment at the hands of the Region 4 EPA, I would request the following:

1. An immediate and unbiased full investigation into the actions and inactions of Region 4 of the EPA in the handling of the Grenada contamination site;
2. A cessation in work on the Grenada contamination site until another Regional Director with approved staff can review the actions taken and assist with the implementation of a plan inclusive with oversight in conjunction with the Mississippi Department of Environmental Quality;
3. A complete removal of field staff from Region 4 of the EPA that have failed to accomplish a sufficient plan to protect the health and welfare of the residents of Eastern Heights or that have provided false or misleading information in connection with the site;
4. A full and detailed report from EPA officials outlining why they failed to communicate truthful information to my constituent, Viola Adams;
5. An investigation into the fraudulent practices of the former operators and the impact of the exposure on hundreds of workers subjected to excessive levels of known carcinogens; and
6. Immediately work with my staff to schedule an appointment to meet with me in my Washington, D.C., office with all EPA staff who can help us to get to the bottom of this issue.

Without making accusations against the EPA, it is troubling to see that, yet again, a primarily African-American area of this country is being destroyed by an environmental hazard but little is being done to come to the people's aid. The most visible issue is Flint, Michigan with its undrinkable water and lead-laden pipes but this is also happening in communities across the country including majority-black Jackson, Mississippi. EPA is currently being sued by civil rights groups for its lack of concern and assistance to certain communities. I hope that race and/or socio-economic status is not the reason for the issues EPA is having in Grenada and I look forward to getting that assurance directly from you.

These issues are of immediate concern. I have attached a full report on the issue to this letter. Additionally, it is my understanding that the City of Grenada has produced a resolution concerning the issue. I will supplement this letter with that resolution as soon as I receive it. Please contact Trey Baker, Legislative Counsel in my Washington, D.C., office with any other questions and to immediately schedule a meeting with me. He can be reached at 202-225-5876 or at Trey.Baker@mail.house.gov.

Sincerely,



Bennie G. Thompson
Member of Congress

enclosures