

# The Brewton Standard

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## How safe is water?

*By Lisa Tindell - news reporter*

Ruth Harrell said she is beginning to feel like Erin Brockovich.

Harrell, a founding member of the Coalition for a Healthier Escambia County, spoke to county commission members Monday about research she has conducted into drinking water standards near Timberlands Landfill in northern Escambia County.

Through data collected from agencies such as the Environmental Protection Agency, the coalition has found that the concentration of mercury in the groundwater test wells has been equal to or above the safe drinking water limits for years, Harrell said.

That information, according to commissioners, had not been provided to the group by Alabama Department of Environmental Management or Timberland officials.

Attempts to speak with Timberland officials were unsuccessful Tuesday.

"We are sharing this information with you since we do not believe that either Timberlands or ADEM has told anyone," Harrell said. "This is information you should know and which the public should know."

Harrell produced a graph to illustrate information found through research of members of the coalition. The graph included information for safe drinking water limits as set forth by the EPA. Harrell said she found the information on ADEM's Web site.

"This shows the concentration of mercury in various Timberlands groundwater test wells," Harrell said. "We all know that mercury is a heavy metal, is unsafe and stays around for a long, long time. The concentration of mercury in these wells, at one point, was five times the EPA limit."

Harrell said the coalition has been actively providing information to residents in Conecuh County, who are faced with the possibility of a mega-landfill in the area.

"We want to provide information for the folks in Conecuh County about this problem," Harrell said. "We don't want them to make the same mistake we did here."

Escambia County Commission Chairman David Stokes said he hopes that landfill does not locate in Conecuh County.

"I hope Conecuh Woods goes away and never happens," Stokes said.

In talking to commissioners, Harrell also said she is concerned about mercury-laced dirt that came to Timberlands from Olin Chemicals in Washington County this year. That material is considered dangerous by ADEM standards, but because of the material's age, it was grandfathered out of meeting those standards. County commissioners said they did not even know about the material until it was reported in area newspapers.

"There were some questions about the solubility tests used to determine the mercury content in 23 tons of dirt from Olin Chemicals in Washington County," Harrell said. "ADEM should let you know when these things happen. I cannot find where they have given you that information."

Commissioner Larry White said he believed violations were made when the tainted materials were brought to Timberlands Landfill.

"This commission was appalled with the special waste accepted there," White said. "There were EPA regulations violated with the moving of that waste. We were not informed about the situation. We don't want to learn about those things in the newspaper. We need the information from ADEM."

Stokes said the county currently does not have a relationship with ADEM representatives, but he said that relationship is necessary.

"What we really need is an ADEM representative we can trust," Stokes said. "We need to have a presence in this county to learn the truth about these kinds of situations."

Harrell said ADEM does not publish ground water test results on its Web site to be made available to the public or government

officials.

"People in Conecuh County have been told by the folks trying to put in the Conecuh Woods Landfill that ADEM posts ground water test results on their Web site," Harrell said. "They do not do that. They have also said the test results are readily available. They are not. They have also said that tests are conducted four times annually. They are not. The tests are only done twice a year. What the people in Conecuh County are being told is not true."

Harrell said groundwater test results are not readily available from any source since September 2006.

"ADEM posted a time series of ground water test results showing mercury content from September 1993 through September 2006," Harrell said. "There is no data available on the ADEM website for any tests after that time."

With ADEM providing information that four tests per year are conducted, a minimum of four test results are unavailable to press, government officials, environmental officials or the general public.

Harrell suggested the commission join the coalition to form an alliance to work toward getting more information about activity and concerns at Timberlands Landfill.

"We would like to work with you to learn more about this, and most importantly, insure this does not happen again," Harrell said. "We are here as partners, not adversaries. We hope that we can become even better partners with Allied Waste so that we can work together to prevent this from happening again."

Stokes said the commission would be happy to work with the group in forming an alliance to address the issues at hand with Timberlands Landfill.

"We are certainly willing to work with the coalition," Stokes said. "Your coalition could provide a list of questions that we could use to open communications with Timberlands officials."

The Coalition for a Healthier Escambia County will continue to work and focus on environmental issues, Harrell said.

"No one knows the environmental impact that may be realized by burning methane gases at Timberlands 24 hours a day, seven days a week," Harrell said. "Methane gas contains mercury and that is burning into our environment. I don't want Escambia County to look back and see that we should have done better."

The coalition will meet again to discuss environmental issues for Escambia County at 7 a.m. Sept. 22 at D.W. McMillan Hospital. The public is invited to attend.