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S.I. LANDFILL ODORS

Brookfield Dump Found to Be Source of Health Problems in the Vicinity in 1982

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 22 — In 1982, odors from the Brookfield landfill on Staten Island were so bad that they sickened people living near it, according to a study by the New York City Health Department.

Landfills are often the subject of complaints by their neighbors, but at Brookfield, a city-owned garbage dump, the complaints were so great during the summer of 1982 that the Health Department conducted a scientifically controlled study to measure the effects of living near it.

The study, a portion of which was described at a conference here this week, found that residents living near the dump were more likely than those living farther away to go to doctors with respiratory and other complaints.

Residents near the site had been particularly concerned because of allegations that millions of gallons of toxic waste have been illegally dumped into the landfill.

Fears of Toxic Chemicals

Dr. Stephen Schultz, deputy city health commissioner for epidemiological services, said there was no evidence that the findings had been caused by toxic chemicals, as opposed simply to the odors of rotting garbage. A Sanitation Department employee has been convicted of taking bribes to allow the dumping of poisonous chemicals at Brookfield.

The Health Department said that the adjoining neighborhoods were uphill from the landfill and that water supplies had not been tainted.

"Odor exposure was the cause of a series of reversible, minor conditions in people living closest to the landfill," Dr. Schultz said. "They were irritated by the smell. It can sicken you, but temporarily."

The study was conducted during the summer of 1982, a year after the landfill was closed, but during a period that the city was digging a trench through it to lay sewer pipes.

"In cutting the trench they exposed decaying garbage," said Vito Turso, a spokesman for the Sanitation Department. "That garbage was left exposed. It seemed like years, but it was probably two months. That's the story of the trench and the stench."

The Health Department study was conducted in two parts.

The first part, described at the annual conference of the American Public Health Association here, was a survey of Staten Island residents, some living near the landfill and others in a similar neighborhood, chosen as a control group, farther away from the dump but otherwise much like the people near the dump.

The residents, in some 555 households, were asked how often they had been to the doctor and for what.

The study found the closer residents were to the landfill the more likely they were to report chest and breathing difficulties, eye, ear, nose and throat problems and stomach and digestive disorders.

Dr. Schultz said the second part of the study, a survey of physicians in the area, found that the residents were "wildly inaccurate" in reporting their own health.

But even so, he said, the results from the doctors supported the finding that residents closest to the landfill had the highest rates of correctable respiratory problems.

"People who lived closest to the landfill did have increased physician visits," he said. "But those visits were for rather insignificant problems."