



Hazardous waste: the EA's what's in your backyard website has been withdrawn (Photograph: Danny Halpin)

Why is it so hard to unearth what's in your backyard?

Danny Halpin

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Anyone curious about the contents of the 1,287 hazardous waste landfills mapped by ENDS can expect their search to be difficult. Even more so for the 413 sites whose waste is classified as “unknown” by the Environment Agency (EA).

This is partly because waste disposal licensing was introduced in 1974 and few records were kept before then. But what information is available can often take months or years to access through Freedom of Information requests to local councils and the EA, or through persistent badgering of private companies.

It took Ian Carroll, a member of the charity Swan Watch in the West Midlands, more than 10 years to discover that white phosphorus, a volatile chemical used in warfare, was the toxic substance poisoning swans and other birds in a pond-like industrial waste dump known as Rattlechain Lagoon.

He said the biggest obstacle in his investigation was the company responsible for managing the site, Rhodia Limited, who put out “statements to deny any responsibility”.

“We had meetings with them and it was just a PR exercise. They didn’t tell me about the chemicals I was setting foot in or coming into contact with. I met the health and safety guy from the company on the site. He said it’s the stuff used in toothpaste, calcium phosphate. I thought well, if you say so, have you got any proof of that?”

Rhodia estimates that 0.1% of the waste in the lagoon is white phosphorus and said it “always makes considerable effort to engage in good faith with stakeholders and is committed to operating responsibly”.

Kye Gbangbola used to work as an environmental consultant before a flood in 2014 left him paralysed and his seven-year-old son Zane dead. He says that hydrogen cyanide, a highly toxic gas found in some industrial waste, leaked into his home from a nearby landfill that he was unaware of. He is angry at the EA for not telling him about the landfill, especially when he later discovered that the agency had installed a gas proof membrane in a hut it had built in 2010.

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“When they built their property, they were aware it was landfill,” said Gbangbola. “I sat in my front garden, with Zane running around, having a meeting with them and at no point did they say you and your family are at risk of death.”

During an inquest, after which the coroner ruled that carbon monoxide from a petrol pump caused Zane’s death, the EA said it had identified a “potential risk from landfill gas” but that it was “cheaper to install a gas proof membrane in the hut than to investigate the gas hazard risk”.

Therein lies the reason why, unless a “significant possibility” of harm is recognised, many historic landfills go uninvestigated and unremediated: it costs a lot of money.

“There’s a perverse incentive to keep it quiet because the costs will bear on the local authority and the EA and their budgets are beleaguered by austerity,” said Gbangbola.

The EA said it is not the regulator of historic landfills and is “not funded to undertake any investigative work in this area”. It used to run an online service called What’s in Your Backyard, where the public could see details of old landfills – names, addresses, licence numbers and types of waste. This has now been withdrawn and replaced with the [historic landfill dataset](#), which some have argued is more for developers than the public.

There are many gaps in the data as the EA says it does “not hold or publish information on sites that were filled prior to 1974”, nor does it update information on sites, even if it has been painstakingly revealed over years by people like Carroll.

In the absence of records, testing the land is the most reliable way of discovering a landfill’s contents. But even that can be fraught with methodological inaccuracies and biases. Professor Andrew Watterson, an expert in environmental health who reviewed an investigation into a link between cancer cases at a North Lanarkshire school and a landfill underneath it, said that when consultants test sites, their conclusions tend to favour those who hired them.

“This may also partly relate to who frames the questions to be answered, who sets the parameters for investigations, who tests for what pollutants, even when there are agreed methodologies for testing,” he said.

“What the public usually seeks is evidence of absence of risks but what they often get is an absence of evidence on some topics and a reluctance to provide evidence on others. I think such data gaps will exist, to differing degrees, on most historic landfill sites and the more open developers and councils are about the limits of testing and their knowledge of sites, the better it will be.”

Tags:

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