

# Witness to Weapons Complex Contamination in Atomic Appalachia

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We always knew something was wrong in Erwin. Maybe it was the secrecy. Maybe it was the barbed wire. Or the armed guards. Or the commando exercises at the shooting range.

Or maybe it was the cancers. ‘The mountains keep things in’, you know. So, we didn’t mention the “C” word. Or we went out of state, some of us, for treatment. Driven out, really. Since our docs in Erwin were under a lot of pressure from the company.

Or maybe it was the trucks dumping at the Bumpass Cove landfill after dark? Or maybe it was the rumors and stories heard at friends’ homes & at church or from perfect strangers who found your number and gave you a call. Or maybe it was the threats to “outside agitators” to “get out of town” or to “check your rear view mirror”.

Or the questions. So many questions! Where did all that missing bomb-grade uranium go? Why was the FBI called in? Was it stolen? Did terrorists take it? Or was it diverted to Israel for that country’s weapons program? Or is it “just” material unaccounted for – that innocent-sounding acronym, “MUF”?

There's a mountain between our home and Erwin. But for other folks in our nuclear neighborhood, their porches look out onto the companies I need to tell you about. The first is Nuclear Fuel Services -- NFS for short -- in Erwin, Tennessee.

NFS is a 60-year-old radioactive chemical operation owned by Babcock & Wilcox. It is the sole supplier of reactor fuel to the Navy's nuclear submarine fleet and, as such, is essential to the maritime prong of the nuclear triad. Since its founding in Erwin -- midway between Oak Ridge and the Savannah River Site -- this corporation has functioned as a "mini-DOE", as one former NFS employee once told us.

And by "us" or "we", I mean Erwin Citizens Awareness Network. ECAN for short. We're a community group incorporated by me, Barbara O'Neal -- an Erwin native and the smartest and toughest activist and government document analyst I have ever worked with. And by Trudy Wallack -- a downstreamer whose property lies along the Nolichucky River into which NFS discharges and who is one of ECAN's most elegant spokeswomen. And with the help of Sue Kelley who tirelessly synthesized and organized hundreds of NRC reports for ECAN. Together with Chris Tipton, Ann Harris and Park Overall, we constitute what the NRC calls "The Wall of Women".

To give you an idea of the lay of the land in "Atomic Appalachia", the Nolichucky River meanders through our region. The river cut gorges in the mountains, and laid out a wide floodplain in the foothills. The Nolichucky is the source of

municipal drinking water for the residents of two counties downstream of NFS. While wells and springs provide the city water pumped by Erwin Utilities.

NFS set up its secret operations along the river. In a bowl, really. The streets of the old town of Erwin rise up from NFS so that the company's short stacks are at grade with people's homes and yards and churches. The geology is complex and constantly changing. Sinkholes open up sporadically, making groundwater flows unpredictable. Springs & creeks abound, including on NFS's site. Fault lines criss-cross the town.

This old railroad hub existed long before NFS. So did the modest homes on Washington Street. And so did Banner Hill Spring where folks traditionally collected mountain spring water. It was next to Banner Hill Spring that NFS built its plutonium processing facility in the mid-Sixties.

And it was, in part, because of that spring – and the Wall of Women -- that the US government declared NFS a “public health hazard”. True story.

We made the feds hear us. Not for ourselves, but for our kids and our neighbor's kids. About that time, a baby was born with cancer & it made big news in Erwin because he had to be taken to St. Jude's Hospital across the state in Memphis.

Also about that time, County economic development types were working to bring a uranium enrichment plant to Unicoi, a town just up the road from Erwin. A brave business owner opened his doors for community meetings and mothers came out.

Their kids were in school near NFS & they asked what would happen if uranium hexafluoride was released by the new factory. Would the emergency drill used in Erwin work? Would stuffing wet paper towels around the classroom windows help? “No. Sorry.” The scientist said. “A cloud of UF<sub>6</sub> will burn everything in its path, and even melt the windows of the school. Just a whiff of UF<sub>6</sub> will eat up their lungs”. The horror we visualized took our breath away. But we knew that the scientist was right.

The sad truth is that Erwin’s kids don’t only live under a cloud of fear. That cloud, formed by the nuclear weapons complex, also pours down radioactive rain on them.

Up until recently, Erwin was a place where radiation-warning signs hung within feet of backyard kiddie playgrounds. The tenants with the kids who used that playground were evicted after NFS learned that they had spoken with a documentary crew who filmed that hideous scene. It took another few years, but NFS ultimately bought out and demolished most of the homes that abutted its fence line. Still, NFS continues to spew Plutonium out its stacks and rains down on the town of Erwin -- Uranium-234, 235, & 238, Thorium-228, 230, & 232 as well as Technetium-99.

And, if children were playing in the creeks or swimming in the Nolichucky downstream of NFS, they would be subjected to Americium-241, Cesium-137, Neptunium-237, radioactive sodium and lead, Radium-224, Technetium-99, 5 isotopes of uranium, 4 of thorium, and 4 isotopes of plutonium – a veritable bath of poisons. Again, this list is from NRC reports.

But there's another military contractor in Atomic Appalachia that I need to tell you about. And that's Aerojet in Jonesborough. This supplier of Depleted Uranium weapons to the Army has also contaminated our environment and the bodies of workers. Thanks to one Christian Peacemaker delegation of CPT Stop-DU campaigners, I met a man who milled DU into penetrator cores at his offsite workshop. The man could no longer stand straight. He leaned. Not because one leg was much shorter than the other, but because of the neurological damage he suffered from DU exposure.

The neighbor across the road from Aerojet has seen a lot too. He told me and others in CPT of how an iridescent plume blew out of one of Aerojet's stubby vents one morning, how it rose up about 90 feet, how it floated behind the factory, and then disappeared from sight. He watched from his front porch as people in hazmat suits covered the roof vents. He saw that workers didn't come in for days. Parking lots were empty. When he called the company, the State, and the NRC, no one would even admit that an accidental release had occurred.

Bottom line: both military contractors dump weapons waste into our air & lungs, into our recreational & drinking water, and – either directly or through fallout from their smoke stacks -- onto the land where our kids play, our gardens grow, our pets hang out or our livestock graze.

It will come as no surprise to you, then, to hear that cancer is rampant in Atomic Appalachia.

In nuclear neighborhoods like mine, kids aren't living long enough to play Little League or go to their first dance. Take Washington Street in Erwin for example. Thanks to an 80-year-old lady who went door-to-door along the street where her sister died of Non-Hodgkin's Lymphoma, we know that every third home in her neighborhood had a cancer case or cancer death. The mother, father & two sons who lived in the home closest to NFS all died from cancer.

Armed with unimpeachable data derived from 193 environmental samples that CPT helped us collect, ECAN made presentations to the National Academy of Sciences, to the Chairwoman of the NRC, and to NRC staff. We proved that NFS had contaminated 95 river-miles of the Nolichucky all the way to where the river empties into Douglas Lake. We insisted that NFS be included in the new study of cancer incidence around nuclear facilities -- and we got it! We argued that NRC should finally do an EIS on NFS' decrepit operations & not extend its license -- and failed miserably. After the government granted NFS a 25-year license extension, the NRC pulled the cancer study, whining that it would (quote) "cost too much".

So, if you needed proof that the arms trade is all about money -- "money that is drenched in blood, often innocent blood"<sup>1</sup>, to quote Pope Francis -- I'm here to testify to that fact loud and clear.

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.usccb.org/about/leadership/holy-see/francis/papal-visit-2015/media-resources/upload/11-EN-congressional-address.pdf>, p. 11/4

But I'm also here to plead with you – especially if you are party to the ban negotiations. Please end the sacrifice of our children, our innocent Appalachian children.

As a mother, and on behalf of Jonesborough and Erwin moms who fear for their kids' lives -- or mourn their loss -- I thank you for your time.