

A once thriving coal town has turned toxic, and citizens are desperate for help

The rate of cancer cases in a former Appalachian coal town is staggering.



Highly toxic PCBs have contaminated streams, drinking water, and soil in the town of Minden, West Virginia, a former coal mining town. CREDIT: MANDEL NGAN/AFP/Getty Images.

Percy Edward “Eddie” Fruit has lived in Minden, West Virginia his entire life. But without funding from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), he cannot afford to move away from his hometown, contaminated by industrial chemicals over the past 30 years. Fruit wouldn’t be able to get anything from the sale of his house because no one

would want to buy property in a toxic town.

“That’s the bad part about Minden,” said Fruit, who worked in the coal mines for eight years before becoming a pipefitter who installed sprinkler systems in schools and hotels. “There’s no one here anymore. Most people have died off or got away from the problem, or moved to find work.”

Minden was a thriving coal mining community during the first half of the 20th century. The town’s mines, located along the scenic New River in Fayette County, were some of the most productive in the region. Life wasn’t easy for the miners and their families, but they were able to make ends meet.

Things have changed since then. Minden is now a toxic wasteland where residents are afraid to drink the water and let their children play in their yards. Residents fear the PCBs — polychlorinated biphenyls, a highly toxic industrial chemical — that were dumped in an abandoned mine starting in the 1970s and stored at an old equipment site are now making them sick and killing them.

Since Minden was designated a *Superfund site* in the 1980s, the EPA has not been able to determine why such a large percentage of the community — at least **four times higher than the national average** — has been diagnosed with cancer. Federal and state health officials claim the evidence **does not support** a finding of a “cancer cluster” in Minden, a conclusion that angers the town’s residents. They believe officials would come to a different conclusion if Minden’s residents were not working class.

Over the past 30 years, the EPA has performed mostly cosmetic cleanup efforts. As a result, PCBs are still believed to be in the town’s water supply and its soil.

Last year, the EPA returned to Minden and is now conducting a new round of testing to determine if the town qualifies to be on the *Superfund National Priorities List (NPL)*. The process is expected to take months, if not years. And as the agency conducts more tests, residents are still getting diagnosed with cancer and dying at exceedingly high numbers.

During his first year as EPA administrator, Scott Pruitt has **vowed** on multiple occasions to make the federal government's clean-up of hazardous waste sites across the nation, known as the *Superfund program*, a top priority. While the administration continues to undermine environmental regulations that protect air and water, the *Superfund program* is one of the few agency initiatives that Pruitt has embraced (despite the Trump administration's failed attempts so far to slash the program's budget).

For the residents of Minden — a town situated in the middle of a state that has borne the brunt of a disproportionate number of the nation's industrial disasters — the decision of whether to designate the area as a national priority will be a test to see if Pruitt stays true to his word.



Percy Edward "Eddie" Fruit, center with coffee cup, and other residents of Minden, West Virginia, are fighting for EPA funds to relocate out of the toxic town. CREDIT: Minden Community Action Team, Headwaters Defense

Minden has become a "*Superfund no-mans-land*," said Brandon Richardson, the founder of *Headwaters Defense*, an environmental justice group based in Fayette County, West Virginia. After attaining *Superfund* status, little was done to help Minden's residents.

"If Minden doesn't qualify to be on the National Priorities List, then I'm not sure what does," Richardson said in an interview with *ThinkProgress*.

The EPA, under the *Superfund* law, is responsible for cleaning up toxic sites around the country. West Virginia **currently has 10** *Superfund NPL* sites. But in order to be added to the priority list, the EPA must decide if the site is eligible and the state of West Virginia must agree with the listing.

The EPA is currently testing to see if the town scores high enough on its ranking system to make it on the priorities list. The agency's *hazard ranking system (HRS)* has three categories: the likelihood that a site has released or has the potential to release hazardous substances into the environment; the toxicity and waste quantity; and people affected by the release of the hazardous substances.

The EPA conducted a new round of soil and sediment sampling around Minden during the week of March 19, the agency said Monday in an email to *ThinkProgress*. Those tests will be used along with previous sampling and other data to help develop a **hazard ranking system package**. If the *HRS* package results in a score above 28.5, the EPA will propose the site for inclusion on the *NPL*. The next opportunity to propose a site is scheduled for September, the agency said.

The agency typically does not provide funding to support cleanup or relocation of residents for communities that do not make it onto the national priority list.

By designating Minden a high priority, Pruitt would make it easier for families and people like Eddie Fruit to receive federal funds to relocate out of the toxic zone.

A history of contamination

The beauty of Fayette County, where Minden is located, can be breathtaking, from the mountains to the New River Gorge. Tourism is a big part of the county's economy, especially from people who come to go hiking or rafting down the New River.

For decades, though, industrial companies and the federal government have used West Virginia as their dumping ground. The federal government, when it would clean up asbestos from its buildings, would then ship the contaminated materials to dumping sites in West Virginia.

“West Virginia is one of the most beautiful places in the world. And people are tired of being collateral damage and they’re tired of living in a toxic waste dump,” Paula Jean Swarengin, a West Virginia native, told ThinkProgress.

Swarengin is running against Joe Manchin (D), the state’s incumbent senator, to be the state’s Democratic nominee for this fall’s Senate election.

A single mom of four boys, Swarengin lives in southern West Virginia about three miles from a mountaintop removal coal site operated by a company owned by Jim Justice, a coal baron who became the state’s governor in January 2017. The mountaintop removal site is

“putting silica dust in my kids’ lungs every day,” she said.

Like other counties in West Virginia, Fayette County has become a dumping ground for dangerous waste. And the current contamination of Minden is a reminder of past disasters in the county.

Less than 20 miles north of Minden is the site of the worst industrial disaster in U.S. history. The Hawk’s Nest Tunnel disaster **killed** more than 750 workers in Fayette County in the early 1930s.

Meanwhile, in Oak Hill, West Virginia, an adjacent town that recently annexed Minden, a frack waste disposal well has been operating in an old abandoned oil well since 2004. Richardson fears the fracking waste getting hauled to Fayette County from northern West Virginia and Pennsylvania, and then injected underground is already leaking into a nearby creek due to the old age of the well.

EQT Corp., the company behind the controversial Mountain Valley Pipeline in West Virginia and Virginia, also **operates** a fracking waste disposal well in Fayette County.



Residents of Minden, West Virginia are urging the EPA to add their town added to the Superfund National Priorities List. CREDIT: Minden Community Action Team, Headwaters Defense

Fayette County was also the site of major battles between coal miners and company executives. Richardson’s great-great grandfather was an organizer with the United Mine Workers of America who battled wealthy mine owners in the 1920s for higher wages and better working conditions.

Nearly a hundred years later, Richardson is carrying on the tradition of his ancestors by fighting powerful interests that have failed to protect the people of Minden.

“We’re just wondering if we do get on the NPL [National Priority List], will any of this happen fast enough to actually help the people in Minden?” Richardson said. “If you wait 10 years to relocate people and come up with the money to do it, you may as well spend that relocation money on burial plots and tombstones because I don’t know if they’re going to have anyone to relocate.”

Richardson is concerned that the EPA is using inaccurate information. He said the agency has recorded only 81 cancer cases in Minden since 1993 while local groups have a registry of about 400 cases of cancer.

"We are telling these agencies what the reality is in Minden with the cancer," he said. But so far, officials have refused to take real, long-lasting action.

PCBs linked to cancer cases

From 1970 to 1984, a company called *Shaffer Equipment Co.* built electrical equipment for the coal industry. Oil that contained PCBs — banned by the EPA in 1979 — was used in the transformers and other equipment that were supplied to the coal mining industry.

During its initial investigations in the 1980s, the EPA found that *Shaffer Equipment* had dumped electrical equipment laden with PCB oil in an abandoned mine site in the center of Minden. The agency found that even when the company followed protocol by storing the oil in containers, some of the fluid leaked onto the ground.

A large body of evidence suggests that exposure to PCBs is associated with an increased risk of many cancers, including cancers of the digestive tract, liver, and skin. PCB exposure is also associated with reproductive deficiencies, such as reduced growth rates and certain neurological effects which may or may not persist beyond infancy. The immune system can also be affected, leading to increased infection rates.

In Minden, the EPA continues to assess the relationship between the dumping of PCBs in the town and the high rate of cancer among residents in the community.

In the last four years alone, Minden has seen 68 cases of cancer, according to tracking by *Headwaters Defense*. The town has a population of about 250, down from a peak of about 1,200 during its heyday as a mining town from the 1920s through the 1950s.



Residents of Minden, West Virginia, are fighting to get the town added to the EPA's Superfund National Priorities List. CREDIT: Minden Community Action Team, Headwaters Defense

"For 30 years, the people of Minden have been trying to get out of their homes," Swearengin said.

Running on a pro-clean energy platform for the Senate Democratic nomination, she is urging the EPA to add Minden to its Superfund NPL.

Since assuming the presidency, Donald Trump has visited the state three times. In December, Trump proclaimed that West Virginia *"is doing fantastically now."*

There's no doubt many West Virginians are pleased a national politician is finally paying attention to them. But for many, the president's rhetoric doesn't match the reality of their daily lives in the Mountaineer State.

Dr. Hassan Amjad, a local physician, conducted a survey to determine the number of cancer cases among current and former Minden residents. Amjad died unexpectedly last August, prior to completion of his study.

Amjad's daughter, Dr. Ayne Amjad, decided to continue her father's research. In a small town like Minden, when so many people have cancer, there has to be an environmental relationship, Amjad said in an interview with *ThinkProgress*.

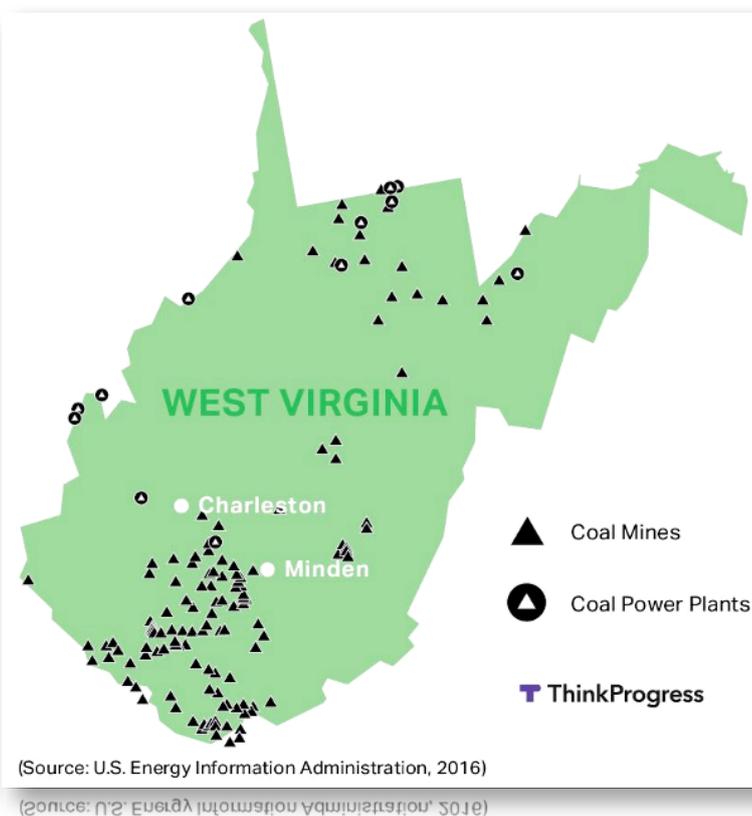
"Looking at the basic information that we have in a population of only 250, it's not bad luck" that a huge percentage of people are getting diagnosed and dying of cancer, she said. "It has to be an environmental reason."

Aside from treating her patients, Amjad also is fighting for federal funds that would allow them to relocate out of Minden. In the meantime, she believes it's important to provide her patients with answers.

"A lot of them want to know if their illness is caused by PCBs," she said. "They worry about their grandchildren, many of whom live with them in Minden."

Like Swearingen, Amjad, a West Virginian native, is running for political office because she believes the current crop of representatives don't care about the suffering occurring across the state. Amjad is **seeking** the Republican nomination for West Virginia's 3rd congressional district in the U.S. House, a position currently held by Rep. Evan Jenkins, who is hoping to get the Republican nomination to run against Manchin.

"I've tried to do things on my own. I can't get anything done. I can serve West Virginia better if I'm in Congress," Amjad said. "We are going into a spiral that's not changing unless you change the people who are making the decisions for us."



Superfund remains popular in Congress

At the federal level, lawmakers **added** \$763 million to the spending bill for FY'18 for various EPA programs related to cleaning up polluted Superfund sites and water infrastructure.

Some of that money could go to Minden, as long as EPA officials choose to prioritize cleanup in the town.

In Missouri, for example, EPA money is going to the *West Lake Superfund site* to excavate the landfill and remove the majority of radioactivity, a job that is expected to take five years to implement.

Radioactive waste linked to the *Manhattan Project* — a research and development project undertaken during World War II that produced the first nuclear weapons — was dumped illegally at West Lake in the early 1970s but the landfill wasn't placed on the *Superfund National Priorities List* until 1990.

"The consideration here was timing, it was certainty, it was respect to human health that was being protected," Pruitt **told** the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* last month about the agency's decision to prioritize the West Lake site.

Richardson said he was heartened when he learned in December that the EPA had **named** the West Lake Landfill near St. Louis, Missouri as one of 21 nationwide sites to be targeted for "immediate, intense action" by the EPA Superfund Task Force.

If Pruitt backs funding for Minden like he did for the West Lake cleanup,

"I think we've got a shot," said Richardson. *"People have been trying to get action on that site [West Lake] forever."*

But if the EPA doesn't take immediate action in Minden, Fruit is worried another big flood will hit Minden and further remove the clay and sand the EPA used to cap the abandoned mine. A 2001 flash flood, where 21 inches of rain accumulated quickly and residents were forced to evacuate by boat, caused PCB contaminants to migrate into the Arbuckle Creek, which runs through the town, and then into the New River, which supplies the water system for Minden and neighboring Oak Hill.

At a March 16 **public meeting** in Minden, residents told EPA officials about their concerns. Fruit, who uses only bottled water for drinking, told the officials that he simply wants help for Minden.

Richardson told the EPA officials that regardless of whether PCB levels are high or not, some kind of chemical contamination has gripped the town and told them it needs to take action to help relocate Minden's residents.