PCBs change 'leap of faith' to full battle

By RICHARD HART
Staff Writer

AFTON — Kenneth and Deborah Ferruccio, a couple from Ohio, were vacationing at Ocracoke Island in 1974.

They offered shelter to a couple from Warrenton whose tent had blown down. When the Ferruccios' tent also became victim to the storm, the other couple invited them home to Warren County for the rest of their vacation.

The friendship forged that weekend brought the Ferruccios back to the lush, rolling land of Warren County. In 1977, the couple bought a 100-year-old log cabin in the Afton community and vowed to live a quiet life.

But quiet is one of the last things anybody calls Kenneth Ferruccio these days.

The English teacher heads the fight against burying PCBs, which were spilled illegally along 210 miles of highways in 1978, in a state landfill four miles from his home.

In nearly three weeks of almost daily protests, more than 400 arrests have been made of demonstrators trying to stop trucks carrying the tainted soil to the dump. Some people have been arrested more than once.

"We came down (to Warren County) with a leap of faith and some new friends," Ferruccio recalled last week. "I have been a student and schoolteacher all my life. I never imagined I'd find myself in a situation like this."

About a year after the Ferruccios moved in, three New York businessmen dumped electrical transformer oil containing PCBs — which had been banned after tests showed it caused liver cancer in laboratory animals — along back roads in 14 North Carolina counties, including Warren County.

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Although the chemical's effect on humans has not been determined, its long lifespan allows it to build up in the environment. The federal Environmental Protection Agency requires that it be burned in approved incinerators or stored in approved landfills. The state decided the best solution was to dig up the contaminated soil and bury it in a landfill.

Warren County was one of the sites considered, and in 1980 the 142-acre site — in Ferruccio's community — was selected.

The day after he found out about it, Ferruccio wrote a letter to The Warren Record decrying the decision, and his fight began. Two years later, he heads Warren County Citizens Concerned About PCB, an organization with 15 area board members and hundreds of followers.

His earliest ally was a local preacher, the Rev. Luther G. Brown, pastor of the Coley Springs Baptist Church. More recently, Gov. James B. Hunt Jr. has called Brown several times to relay messages from the governor's office to the group.

Brown's church, which is 2½ miles from the landfill, has been the staging point for protests organized since the state began the cleanup Sept. 15. Most of Brown's congregation of about 600 families lives near the landfill.

"I went to see Ken the day after I read the letter," Brown said. "We've been in it together since then."

It wasn't much more than the two of them and a handful of friends and neighbors for two years. Residents were relying on a suit filed by the Warren County Board of Commissioners against the dump, fighting it on environmental grounds.

But in May, when the suit was on appeal after defeats in lower state and federal courts, the commissioners agreed to drop the suit if the state promised to deed back a 122-acre buffer zone around the site and promise that no toxic waste, except PCBs, would go in the dump.

"We left the fighting in the hands of the county commissioners," Brown said. "Then they sold us out."

The commissioners' chairman, Walter "Jack" Harris, said last week that the decision to drop the suit was not a sellout, but a compromise.

"There was always a chance that we would lose had we proceeded with the appeal, because we had already lost twice," Harris said. "Then the state would have owned all that land and been in the position of being able to put whatever it wanted in there."

After the commissioners dropped their suit, the committee filed a federal suit charging civil rights violations in locating the dump in a county with a 56 percent black population. That suit is on appeal after a federal judge ruled against the committee, saying there was no indication of racial bias in selection of the site.

But they did not give up on the environmental fight. "It is an environmental issue as well as a human rights issue," Ferruccio said, "because you're discriminating against a community unfairly by threatening it with a toxic chemical."

The committee's expert on the environmental aspect is Joseph S. Lennon, 63, Warren County's health director. He moved to Warren County four years ago after spending 30 years as a hospital administrator.

"I'm trying to help," he said last week. "I think that's part of my responsibility as health director, to protect the health of everybody in the county. That's what I'm charged with."

Lennon has researched various means of detoxifying PCBs, and has apprised the committee of his findings. "I share the information with them because I think it's important for them to know what the possibilities may be."

He says he thinks the landfill ought to be detoxified, using bacteria that have been found to break down the chemical.

The committee uses the skills of its members. An artist designs protest signs and banners that dot the countryside. An engineer who became a pig farmer checks the construction of the landfill.

"There is no hierarchy," Ferruccio said.

"This is a democratic thing. We agree that decisions aren't made by any leader, but by the committee," said Ferruccio, 40, who along with his wife, Deborah, 29, have been part-time English teachers at Vance-Granville Community College.

While protesters' actions may appear to be part of a larger strategy, most decisions are made by the group the night — or perhaps hours — before anything happens.

The leadership also has forged an alliance with civil rights organizers who have joined their fight on the basis of allegations that the county's black population was a factor in the site selection.

While leaders from the Southern Christian Leadership Conference and the United Church of Christ's Commission for Racial Justice have led recent demonstrations, they answer to the committee, the committee members insist.

"The leadership is the citizens of Warren County," Ferruccio said.

"Outsiders? I think it's great," Henry Rooker, a member of the committee who is a disabled veteran suffering from cancer, said of the civil rights groups.

"I was a little uneasy at first because of the false rumors I've heard. But I hate to think what would have happened by now if they hadn't come. They are concerned."

Other leaders of the group are:

- James and Evangeline Ward,

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