Speakers Focus On Pollution

The Poor Are 'Victims Of Environmental Injustice,' One Critic Says

By William Allen
Post-Dispatch Science Writer

Pollution in poor pockets of cities, largely occupied by minorities, is causing grief and rage that few outsiders pay attention to, a St. Louis civil rights leader says.

"Among the victims of environmental injustice, there's anger and fear about the future," the Rev. Buck Jones said Friday. "And there's pain about how others have mistreated them."

Jones is minister of the Metropolitan Mission for the Illinois South and the Missouri Conference of the United Church of Christ. He spoke at the annual World Ecology Day symposium at the University of Missouri at St. Louis.

The symposium, sponsored by the university's International Center for Tropical Ecology, drew about 200 people, most of them from St. Louis area high schools.

Three fifth-graders from the McKelvey Elementary School in the Parkway District won the symposium's environmental display contest for their exhibit: "Compost: A Positive Effect on the Environment." The students are Lindsay Abbett, Katie Guebert and Allison Hourcade.

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The symposium — on "Environmental Justice: Pollution, Poverty and People" — featured several activists and industry executives. They argued about whether industry behaves responsibly when it generates pollution in minority communities.

Jones described a distraught East St. Louis woman who came to his office one day complaining of pollution from industrial plants.

"We can't smell it, we can't see it and we can't touch it, but we know it's there — because it's killing people in my community," the woman told him, crying. She reported that 25 people on her block had cancer, then revealed that she had just received a diagnosis of cancer.

"Why won't someone pay attention to us?" she asked. "We feel like throw-away people."

In a slide show, Jones depicted a legacy of industrial pollution and government indifference in East St. Louis. He called on the audience to challenge government and industry to correct environmental problems there and in St. Louis.

Representatives of Monsanto Co. and Mallinckrodt Chemical Inc. cited recently developed programs aimed at cutting pollution and improving relations with residents near their plants.

"We do the right thing," said Keith Miller, an environmental official with Monsanto's W.G. Krummrich Plant, in Sauget. "We go beyond compliance [with pollution regulations]. We realize that we are granted by the public the privilege to operate."

He cited Monsanto's progress in reducing emissions, improving the handling of hazardous materials and establishing links with residents.

Ron Harding, vice president of operations for Mallinckrodt, said the company had reduced emissions to land, air and water by 50 percent since 1987.

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