



KFTC member Hazel King tried to tempt passersby to water from communities affected by strip mining. "Our water supply is damaged or destroyed," King said.

'Last Resort' Offers Dubious Delights Kentuckians Fight for Safe Water

—by Jerry Hardt

One wouldn't be able to find drinks like the "Brine Brew," the "Clover Fork Cooler" or the "Thirst Quencher" on the menu of any restaurant in town, but on October 27, those drinks and several others with equally suspicious titles could be found as "The Last Resort" on the steps of the Capitol Plaza Tower in Frankfort, Kentucky.

Members of the Kentucky Fair Tax Coalition (KFTC), from several Kentucky communities brought their problems with water quality to the state capitol to illustrate their frustrations with government inaction in protecting their drinking water. They came with jars of water from their homes and streams, set up an old-fashioned-lemonade stand called "The Last Resort" in front of the building that houses the Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Cabinet offices, and tried to interest passerbys in trying a sample of the "Rough and Tough Rumbler" or the "Ligon Lopsider."

"We have come today with a simple message: our water supply is damaged or destroyed, our health and safety are threatened and the state is

not taking the necessary action to prevent or solve these problems," stated Hazel King, of Harlan County, in a prepared statement.

King, like the representatives from five other communities who brought their bad water to Frankfort, are KFTC members who have used the group's technical assistance to communities experiencing the water quality and supply problems and learned to take samples of their own water.

Water monitoring project releases study documenting mining's damage

Through KFTC's Citizens Education and Water Monitoring Project, directed by Pat Sloan, a report on the causes of well contamination and dewatering was recently made available to residents who can use it to context permit applications for additional mining in areas under study.

"Coal mining, oil and gas drilling, and other land uses and disturbances have caused serious pollution of our creeks and rivers and have caused hundreds of water wells to go dry or become contaminated," King added. "The problems have resulted primarily from careless and

oftentimes illegal practices, yet the state has continually refused to adequately enforce existing laws and regulations in order to stop this pollution and protect our public water supplies."

Although eye-catching, local brew was not in demand

There were no takers for the water, which ranged from clear with rusty specks floating in it to a coal black color. Demonstrators emphasized that the water was much more than just muddy or dirty and that it contained concentrations of heavy metals, salts, and runoff from toxic substances.

In one sample from a landfill runoff in the Sloans Valley area of Pulaski County, hazardous wastes were found.

Charles Philips, Floyd Taylor, and Beverly May took a sample of the runoff from the site, calling it the "Sloan Valley Sinker." Its menu description was "zips down the hatch with an overflow of choice bacteria . . . one to remember your biology teacher by. Soon to be available at underground cave stores."

"This is water runoff from a landfill situated at the top of a mountain," Philips explained to on-lookers. "It's going directly into Lake Cumberland."

Later, while visiting the offices of the state's Division of Water, the Pulaski County delegation got an admission that asbestos had been dumped in the landfill and that this dangerous substance was probably leaching into the landfill's runoff.

For instance, residents in the Grapevine-Upper Johns Creek area of Pike County began experiencing contaminated or sinking wells about 1980. Eventually, they realized that nearby mining activities were the cause of the problem, and when the appropriate government agencies would do nothing to help them, they organized the Grapevine-Upper Johns Creek Concerned Citizens and asked KFTC for assistance.

The CEWMP study for Grapevine included a survey of 147 wells in the area. Forty-four of these have already been disturbed by the mining, primarily through a dewatering of the aquifer from which most of the wells draw their water. The potential for other wells being similarly affected is great, particularly if plans by the mining company to expand its operations are allowed by the state.

Well contamination occurs when the water table is drawn down, exposing rocks which contain pyrite to oxygen and water, causing chemical reactions. Iron and other metals may also react and leak into the water supply. Contamination may also occur as the water table dewater, drawing down increased amounts of surface water.

"Since mining has taken place (on Grapevine Creek), people have had water problems," stated James O. Bevins, a resident of Grapevine Creek. "You can hardly wash your hands in it, it'll eat your hide off," he added, holding up a jar of "the Grapevine Guesser."

"Mining is proceeding toward our area. Our wells are next; it's just a matter of time. We would like to see something done."

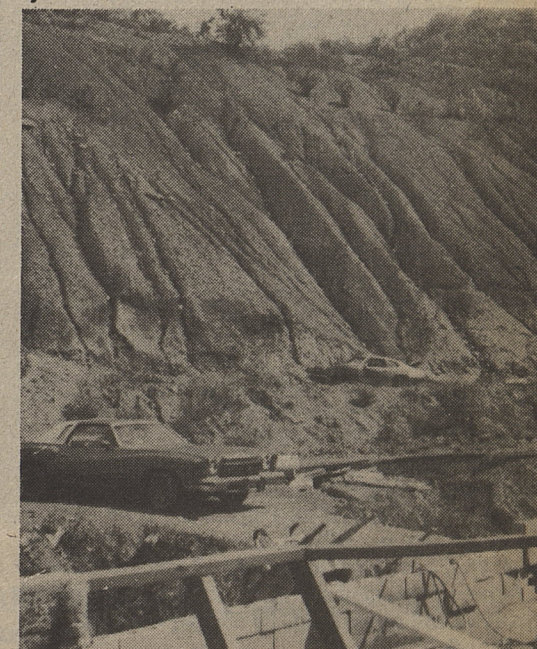
Pollutants invade aquifer, enter plumbing and drinking sources

Many of the samples were taken from the faucets in the homes of those protesting, and came from the only source of drinking water they have. Other samples were taken from creeks and rivers that run near their homes.

Helen Newsome took a sample of water from her kitchen faucet as well as from Clear Creek which runs near their home in Ligon, in Floyd County. The menu description for the "Ligon Lopsider" was: "wicked wastewater from a coal crusher."

"We're experiencing black water . . . it's running out of our faucets, through our creek," Newsome explained, supported by the black samples of the Lopsider.

"There are laws, but they are not enforced," she added. "I've called hundreds of times, but I'm ignored."



Strip mine run-off pollutes streams, but blasting can destroy the aquifer and water supplies.

A "menu" was passed out to those who stopped at the stand which gave descriptions for each of the drinks. Brine Brew was described as "perhaps the most fan-toxic combination of salts, heavy metals and organic compounds." The very acidic Rough and Tough Rumbler, taken from a mine drainage site in Floyd County, was "guaranteed to clean you out . . . and then some."

Listed as "possibly the best drink to be found in eastern Kentucky" was the Thirst Quencher. It was an empty jar of water.

KFTC members will continue to fight for clean, adequate supplies of water. To join KFTC, or to find out more about its Citizens Education and Water Monitoring Project, contact KFTC, Box 60, Lovely, KY 41231; (606) 886-6499.