

Sweet Land, Bitter Deal:

Immigrant Detention and Unbreathable Air in Florida's Sugarcane Heartland

Overview

Long before the Glades County Detention Center opened, Glades County had a dark history fueled by extractive economies and profits. Florida is the largest cane-producing state in the United States, and most sugarcane is grown on the southern shores of Lake Okeechobee, known as the Everglades Agricultural Area. Glades County has long relied upon migrants and immigrants to sustain local industries such as this. This report shows the parallels between the exploitative sugarcane industry and carceral land uses. The Glades County Detention Center was just another way the county sought to generate revenue relying on the labor and time of immigrants—extracting money from their labor in sugarcane fields and their time incarcerated.

When the Glades Detention Center was built, the largest non-agricultural employer in Glades County was the privately-owned prison across the street, owned and operated by GEO Group. It is in this context—a toxic rural economy, built on the exploitation of migrant and immigrant labor—that the Glades County Detention Center came into being, a legacy that lives on to this day.

Toxic to the Core

Through exhaustive documentation, this report shows that detained people were sprayed with antimicrobial sprays at toxic concentrations, exposed to disabling carbon monoxide leaks, and sprayed with pepper spray as punishment and retaliation for asking for necessities like water and toilet paper. These are just three of myriad forms of pervasive, systemic environmental harm. Even if someone is detained only for a few days, the negative health impacts can last a lifetime.

Industrial Chemical Disinfectant Misuse

During the COVID-19 pandemic, detention centers and jails in the U.S. systemically failed to protect those inside their walls. People detained at Glades did not have access to sufficient protective equipment or basic sanitation supplies and described unsanitary and unsafe conditions. By the end of May 2020, the Glades Detention Center had one of the highest COVID-19 rates in the country. In response, Glades County Sheriff's Department chose to spray a highly toxic chemical disinfectant multiple times per day—in enclosed and poorly ventilated housing units, and in the presence of detained people. Spraying happened at 6am, 12pm, and 6pm every day. Detained people were not allowed to leave the pod while the chemical dissipated. During that time, people even reported being sprayed at night, while sleeping, and waking up sweating and with breathing difficulties.

Two disinfectant sprays were used at Glades, Mint and Maxim Neutral. Both contain antimicrobial quaternary ammonium compounds (QACs), a highly toxic industrial pesticide. In the United States, chemicals like this are regulated by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) under the Federal Insecticide, Fungicide, and Rodenticide Act (FIFRA). FIFRA regulations stipulate how substances like Mint and Maxim Neutral are to be used, but these requirements were violated at Glades. Both were administered at much higher concentration than allowable by the manufacturer or the EPA. As

documented in a letter from Earthjustice and the Shut Down Glades Coalition, this 2:1 ratio is 64 times greater than the maximum concentration permitted by Mint's FIFRA labeling.

Complaints and testimonies detail that people detained inside Glades experienced painful, burning, red, and swollen eyes, nose, and throat; painful breathing, accompanied by sneezing and coughing that sometimes produce blood; severe nausea; stomach pain; and headaches as a direct result of hazardous chemicals being sprayed on them. Severe QAC toxicity can induce acute respiratory, liver, and renal failure, cardiovascular collapse, seizures, coma, and death. Long-term exposure to QACs is associated with increased asthma risk, and animal studies indicate that even short-term exposure to some types of QACs can lead to severe airway inflammation and altered breathing patterns. Chronic exposure to QACs is also associated with serious impacts to the reproductive system, including altered reproductive cycles, reduced fertility, and birth defects.

Carbon Monoxide Poisoning

In 2021, a carbon monoxide buildup in the Glades detention center kitchen poisoned nine people: six detained kitchen workers and three Glades staff members. Breathing in carbon monoxide—an odorless substance produced by gas-burning stoves—prevents the body from using oxygen properly, and harms the brain, heart, and other organs. The poisoning incident was so severe that four detained men (and at least one Glades Sheriff's Office employee) were hospitalized following the exposure.

However, other detainees who worked in the kitchen who were exposed to carbon monoxide were not even taken to the hospital, regardless of whether they were detained or not. Instead, they were forced to remain in the kitchen, where poisonous gas was presumably still building up, until they had finished serving lunch. Only after lunch service was complete were they taken to the jail's medical unit, where their vitals were checked, and they received thirty minutes of supplemental oxygen. Later that same day, they were sent back to serve dinner—even though the kitchen was not cleared as safe until the next day. While detained people working in the kitchen were the ones primarily impacted, detained people working near the kitchen reported experiencing symptoms.

Exposure to carbon monoxide aggravated the asthma and other chronic conditions of detained workers. Carbon monoxide poisoning is easily preventable, but the Glades detention center did not have a carbon monoxide monitor. The failure to install carbon monoxide monitors was part of a pattern of neglect that rendered the air inside the jail unbreathable.

Although the carbon monoxide concentration at the time of the event is unknown, it is very likely that it reached or exceeded 150 ppm given that two people in the area were rendered unconscious. Yet rather than clearing all people from the enclosed space at that point, detainees were forced to continue working. When they returned for the evening shift, they received no assurance or proof that carbon monoxide levels had abated. Such exposure risks serious, long-term consequences for detained people. Even when it is not fatal, carbon monoxide inhalation is debilitating and can cause permanent damage to the brain, heart, and other vital organs.

Pepper spray

Pepper spray is routinely used by police officers and prison and jail guards and is usually made of oleoresin capsicum, a highly concentrated form of the active ingredients in hot peppers, or its synthetic form, pelargonic acid vanillylamide or capsaicin II. Pepper spray produces a burning sensation in the

eyes and skin, causes temporary blindness, and restricts breathing. These impacts are debilitating and painful. The use and misuse of pepper spray is linked to serious injuries and death.

Pepper spray was systematically deployed as a form of punishment, and in retaliation when detained people asked for necessities like water and toilet paper. In addition, a series of complaints and legal cases established that pepper spray was disproportionately used against Black people detained at Glades. Exposure to pepper spray also placed detained people at greater danger for COVID-19 infection and exacerbated existing medical conditions.

Conclusion

Exposure to toxic spraying, carbon monoxide poisoning, and the use of pepper spray rendered air within the Glades County Detention Center unbreathable. This **collectively punished** detained and jailed people, who could not escape these hazards. The findings of this report are only possible because of the detained people, who—supported by legal advocates and organizers—created an archive of unbreathable air documenting conditions at Glades. This archive was built over years and at great personal risk.

Reporting or contesting violent conditions at Glades was often met with retaliation. Glades County Sheriffs and the Glades Correctional Development Corporation deny that any abuse took place at the facility. Detained people reported violence at Glades despite the documented pattern of retaliation for reporting. They did so not only to seek justice for themselves but to create an archive that illuminated patterns of abuse at Glades. This archive allowed legal advocates, community organizers, and now, researchers to assemble documentation and identify common practices in detention.