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# Tampa Bay Times

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## Tribe halts online betting

It may be months before the Seminoles' Sportsbook operation resumes operations.

BY MARY ELLEN KLAS  
*Times/Herald Tallahassee Bureau*

The Seminole Tribe's Hard Rock Sportsbook on Saturday announced an immediate suspension of its Florida operation as a result of an appellate court ruling that rejected a request to continue online sports betting as it tries to overturn a lower court decision.

"Due to yesterday's appellate court decision, the Hard Rock Sportsbook mobile app will temporarily suspend accepting new bets and deposits," the Hard Rock Sportsbook stated on Twitter. "Player information and account funds are safe and secure, and the app will remain online for easy withdrawals via all payment methods."

Gary Bitner, the tribe's spokesperson, said in a statement to the *Times/Herald* on Saturday that "account balances for all current players will be refunded as requested."

The Hard Rock Sportsbook said that the suspension includes the acceptance of all new bets, new accounts and new deposits, but "all active bets starting before 11 a.m. ET on Dec. 4, 2021 will run and settle based on event outcome per normal."

Any bets after that time, however, "will be voided and initial bet amounts returned to your app wallet. This includes all future bets."

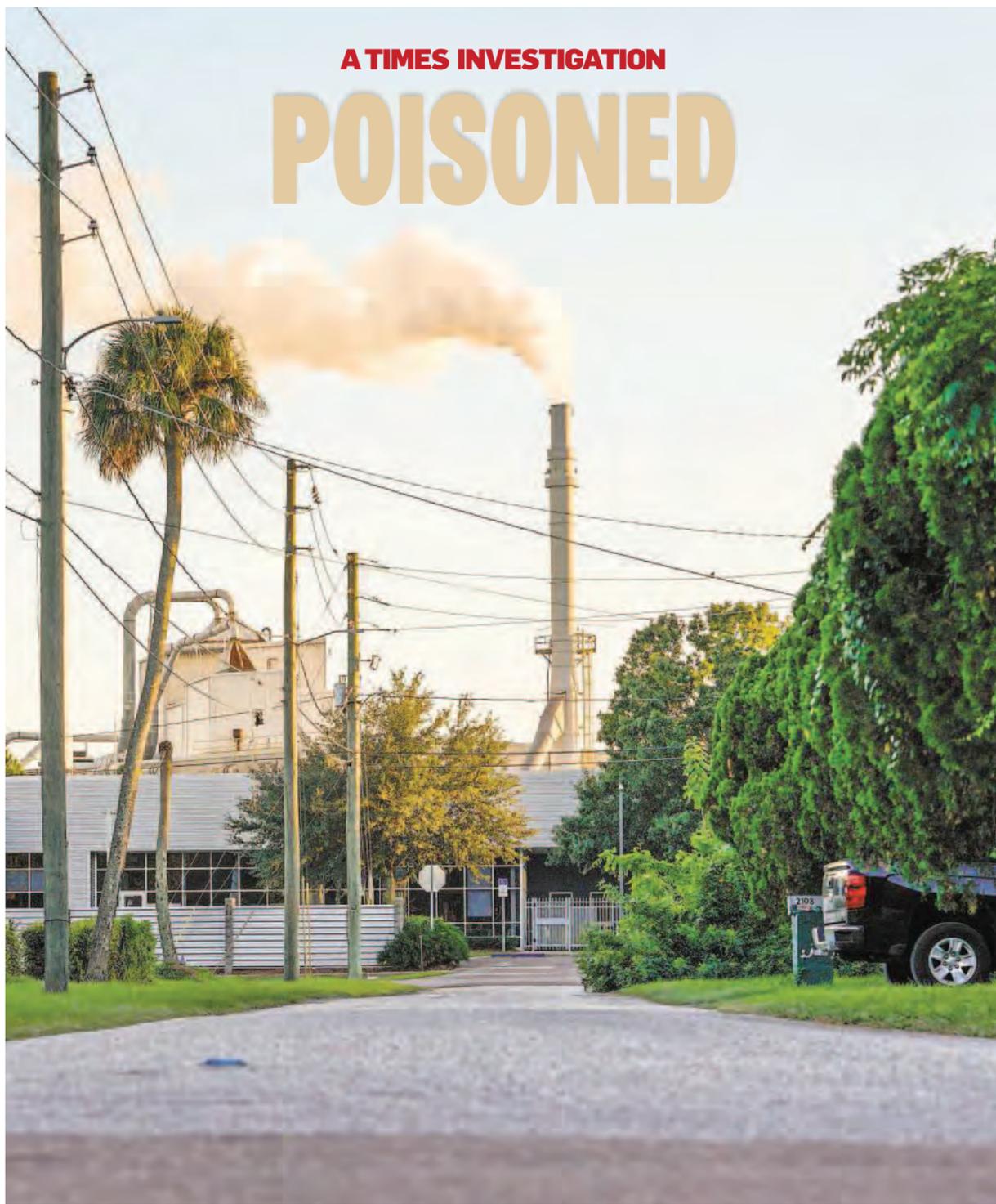
The company added that free bets will not be allowed to be withdrawn, but the Hard Rock Sportsbook "will maintain a lot of free bets in your account, which will be available again if HardRock Sportsbook resumes accepting new bets."

It may be months, however, before the tribe is allowed to resume its sports book as the legal challenge winds through the court.

Two lawsuits challenging the legality of the compact were brought by West Flagler Associates, the owners of Magic City Casino and Bonita Springs Poker Room, and a group of plaintiffs that includes No Casinos and Miami businessmen Armando Codina and Norman Braman.

After the lawsuits were filed, however, the tribe quietly opened what it called its "early access launch" of its sports book app on Nov. 1, which allowed anyone in Florida over age 21 to place bets and collect online wagers on sporting events via the internet using the Hard Rock Sportsbook app from anywhere in Florida.

On Nov. 22, Judge Dabney L. Friedrich of the U.S. District Court See **BETTING, 3A**



A TIMES INVESTIGATION

## POISONED

Photos by MARTHA ASENCIO-RHINE | Times

### Gopher Resource promised changes at Tampa's old lead factory. It kept polluting.

#### PART 3: THE FALLOUT

BY COREY G. JOHNSON, REBECCA WOOLINGTON AND ELI MURRAY

*Times Staff Writers*

**O**n the eastern edge of Tampa, smokestacks rise above Josefina Zepeda's cozy bungalow. The stacks reach 130 feet into the sky, higher than anything else around them, and exhale plumes filled with toxic gases and metal.

They belong to the lead factory.

Zepeda and her 21-year-old son, Gustavo Araujo, have lived within 500 feet of the factory for more than a decade. They've felt its buzz day and night. They've seen smog fill the neighborhood, where cottages and industrial yards sit beneath a canopy of palms and oak trees dripping Spanish moss.

Zepeda sometimes develops a cough and stuffy nose when she breathes the foul air. Araujo's asthma worsens, his throat becoming scratchy and his breath-

ing labored.

"I worry for him," his mother said.

This past year, a *Tampa Bay Times* investigation revealed that Gopher Resource put hundreds of workers at risk by allowing toxic dust to accumulate inside the factory, prompting a \$319,000 federal fine for workplace violations.

But the company's practices have also threatened the surrounding community and environment, the *Times* has found.

Records show a pattern of the factory polluting the air and water that started in the 1960s and has continued since Gopher bought the plant 15 years ago.

To understand the plant's environmental impact, reporters reviewed thousands of pages of regulatory and company documents, analyzed federal air emissions data and interviewed factory workers, neighboring residents and nearby business owners.

See **POISONED, 6A**

**ABOVE:** Gopher Resource's Tampa plant has put more lead into the air than any factory in Florida.

**BELOW:** Josefina Zepeda and her son, Gustavo Araujo, stand in front of their home, within 500 feet of the Gopher Resource lead smelter.



**Online** To read all of the stories in our Poisoned series, visit [www.tampabay.com/poisoned](http://www.tampabay.com/poisoned)

### AN APPEALS COURT FOR TAMPA BAY?

The Florida Supreme Court is recommending that a new 6th District Court of Appeal be created grouping Pinellas, Hillsborough and Pasco counties with the Sarasota region. **Local & State, 1B**

### PHOTO OP: SANTA'S LAP OR SOCIAL DISTANCING

The jolly old elves are tiptoeing back through the pandemic. Some will offer full-contact visits, lap sitting included, while others will keep their distance as a pandemic precaution. **Business, 1D**

### BUCS STUCK WITH FAKE VACCINE CARDS ISSUE

The Bucs have tried to paint themselves as either clueless or helpless about fake vaccine cards, columnist John Romano writes. Claims of a zero-tolerance policy with Antonio Brown will be tested. **Sports, 1C**

### Nice and sunny

8 a.m. Noon 4 p.m. 8 p.m.  
62° 77° 78° 71°

0% chance of rain  
**More, Page 8C**

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Business D	Astrology Comics
Floridian E	Classified 1F
Baylink F	Editorials 2P
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MARTHA ASENCIO-RHINE | Times

In the distance, Gopher's smokestacks tower above Kenly Elementary School in Tampa.

## POISONED continued from 1A

Among the findings:

- The plant has pumped more lead into the air than any other factory in Florida over the last two decades. Its emissions forced the surrounding area out of compliance with federal air-quality regulations — and made Hillsborough County the worst in the state in terms of cumulative lead released into the atmosphere.
- Gopher knows exactly when county regulators monitor air quality and has taken steps to reduce pollution on those days. Nearly three dozen current and former employees said they were directed to change work patterns to lower the amount of lead dust stirred up when air monitors were running. One expert likened the measures to “cooking the books.”
- In the past six years, Gopher repeatedly discharged polluted water into the Palm River, sent too many chemicals into Tampa’s sewer system, and mishandled hazardous waste. It erroneously shipped tons of a dangerous material to a landfill near a residential community in Polk County at least twice. Gopher reported the error, and state regulators forced the company to dig up the waste.
- Residents and workers at nearby businesses have raised a variety of concerns with the Hillsborough County Environmental Protection Commission. One railroad worker reported a yellow-orange cloud, later identified as poisonous nitrogen oxides. Other people who live and work in the area described tasting metal in the air and smelling a sulfur scent, like rotten eggs.
- Local, state and federal environmental agencies have hit the company with dozens of violation notices and more than \$540,000 in fines and fees. During an investigation this summer, prompted by the *Times*’ initial reporting, county regulators found more than 24 possible violations, including failing to report mechanical issues that could increase air pollution. Officials have said more fines are likely.

Gopher’s Tampa factory is the only lead smelter in Florida and one of only 10 such operations in the U.S. Inside, workers take old car batteries, extract the lead and melt it in furnaces to make new blocks of metal to sell.

The process recently has been marketed as “green,” a way to save millions of lead-acid batteries from winding up in landfills each year. But the industry is an old and often dirty one. Across America, lead smelters have shuttered as they polluted communities and failed to adapt to tougher federal air-quality regulations that made it safer, but more costly, to operate.

Gopher leaders would not agree to an interview for this story. The company issued a series of statements, saying it had invested \$140 million on environmental and safety-related upgrades since buying the Tampa plant. Over the last three years, Gopher’s leaders have put

a quarter of the operating budget toward those improvements, the company said.

Air quality around the plant has improved since 2013. That’s no accident. Gopher came to Tampa at a time when the federal government was cutting allowable levels of lead in the community air by 90 percent. The company promised to meet that standard while also growing and fueling the local economy.

But inside the plant, problems mounted.

The *Times*’ initial investigation found the factory’s ventilation system for years didn’t function correctly and the company disabled key features meant to capture fumes in the workspace. As a result, workers were exposed to air-lead levels hundreds of times the federal limit.

Lead’s effects on a community can be easy to miss and hard to quantify. The poison is often invisible, settling into soil or household dust. But it is potent. Decades of research has linked even low-level lead exposure to cognitive and behavioral problems in children.

The community surrounding Gopher is especially vulnerable. More than 800 people live nearby. Most are people of color. More than a quarter are experiencing poverty.

On East Jewel Avenue, which runs alongside the plant, a sign warns drivers to watch for kids. Kenly Elementary School is a half-mile from the factory’s gates.

Dozens of soil samples taken by *Times* reporters showed lead concentrations higher than typical levels in Hillsborough County. The highest concentrations were closest to the plant. Two results, taken within 1,500 feet, were higher than what the federal government considers dangerous for kids.

Gopher’s footprint in the community has grown steadily over

the years. The company has spent at least \$10.5 million on more than a dozen nearby residential and industrial properties. It has leveled some, leaving the blocks around the factory a checkerboard of empty grass lots and houses. Residents describe the transformation with a certain eeriness. One by one, they said, the homes were gone.

For those who have stayed, including longtime resident Andy Klodakis, the concerns linger.

He put it simply: “That battery place scares me.”

### A new kind of owner

The lead factory wasn’t always in this corner of Tampa.

Gulf Coast Lead, as it was once known, opened its first plant in Temple Terrace in 1953. The company closed the smelter after a decade and replaced it with a two-story brick apartment complex called Normandy Park. In the 1990s, the federal government found that children at the apartments were playing in soil filled with lead-tainted battery chips.

The soil has since been cleaned up. To this day, the apartment complex houses families. It is treated like a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency Superfund site — a designation for some of the most polluted places in the country that have been decontaminated but the government continues to monitor.

Gulf Coast restarted its lead operation in a new factory about eight miles south, near the bend in the Palm River and CSX rail yard. The neighborhood was home to both industry and single-family houses.

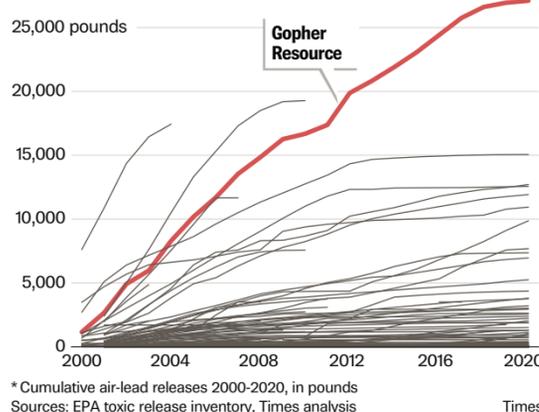
“It’s always been that way,” said Valerie Washington, a former longtime president of a local neighborhood association.

At the new location, Gulf Coast racked up violations for polluting.

The EPA sued the company in the ‘80s for contaminating the

### Lead in the air

Gopher’s Tampa plant has released more lead into the air than any facility in the state over the past two decades.\* Gopher bought the plant in 2006.



soil and groundwater. It quickly settled. A decade later, regulators found high levels of lead in the soil at a neighboring mobile home park. Some children who lived there had elevated levels of metal in their blood. State health officials later flagged Gulf Coast as a significant source of lead exposure among children.

At the same time, the plant struggled to meet federal air-quality standards, regulatory documents show. Rail yard workers told the county that emissions burned their eyes and throats and made them sick. Neighbors complained of pungent odors.

Gopher, which had operated a smelter in Minnesota for decades, bought the plant in 2006. It vowed to be a new kind of owner.

Almost immediately, the company announced plans to enclose the furnace area. Its longer term plan, it said, was to build an entirely new, fully enclosed plant. The old one was open-air and allowed toxic chemicals, including lead, to escape into the neighborhood.

In 2008, during the early phases of construction, county officials cited Gopher for failing to take precautions to control dust, releasing too much lead into the air and submitting inaccurate records.

The scrutiny increased in November 2010. Using data from the previous three years, the federal government deemed a mile-wide area encircling the plant one of 18 places in the United States out of compliance with new, tougher standards for lead in the air.

Gopher finished building the new plant in 2012. But that year, roughly a third of community air readings exceeded the federal government’s limit.

It was around that time the lead smelter earned a dubious distinction: The cumulative amount of lead it had released into the atmosphere since 2000 was more than any other public or private plant in Florida, according to self-reported data.

In 2013, it ran into trouble with emissions again: County regulators found Gopher had released excessive amounts of lead, sulfur dioxide and volatile organic compounds. Then, in 2014 and 2015, fires at the plant discharged more lead than allowed into the neighborhood.

Over seven years, the county had fined Gopher \$192,964 for air pollution.

### ‘Playing God’

After a rocky start to Gopher’s time in Tampa, levels of the poison in the community’s air started to fall.

In a statement to the *Times*, Gopher noted that the amount of lead in the air around the plant is far below national limits set by the EPA.

“These testing results irrefutably show that any emissions that could be attributable to Gopher remain far below EPA standards,” the statement said.

A *Times* analysis of county data through last year found the emissions captured by air monitors were lowest in 2014 and 2015. And in September 2018, the area around Gopher was removed from the list of places that didn’t meet the federal government’s standards for lead in the air.

Much of the decline was because Gopher had enclosed the furnace and other areas of the plant.

But the county’s air monitoring system can also be gamed, government regulators acknowledged. The county monitors run on a set schedule, allowing companies to plan. And Gopher did just that, its workers said.

Internal calendars, documents and interviews with 33 current and former workers show that Gopher took extra steps to keep emissions lower on the days it knew regulators were watching.

The county Environmental Protection Commission operates three air-quality monitors outside of Gopher’s factory. One is in the CSX rail yard behind the plant. Another sits outside an empty business off East 14th Avenue, a few blocks north. The third is at Kenly Elementary.

The monitors look like bird-houses with pitched roofs. As air flows through them, filters capture lead particles. Regulators swap out the filters, which are sent to a lab for testing.

All three monitors run on the same schedule: every six days for 24 hours, from midnight to midnight. The timetable is set by the county and published publicly by the federal government.

An area is deemed in violation of federal standards when a three-**See POISONED, 7A**



Times

## POISONED continued from 6A

month rolling average of readings exceeds 0.15 micrograms of lead per cubic meter of air. Regulators then try to identify what caused the deterioration in air quality, and companies can be cited for actions that resulted in increased emissions.

At Gopher, company leaders made sure employees knew when the government monitors would be on, the workers said. They marked monitoring days on internal calendars at least as early as 2009. They sent emails about the monitoring, posted reminders on an internal television screen and referenced the schedule in a draft copy of a training manual.

“Everybody knew air monitoring day, when it was and what was supposed to happen,” said Ko Brown, a former furnace supervisor who left the plant in 2017 and is now suing Gopher, alleging that he unknowingly carried lead home from the factory and exposed his young son.

Workers, he added, were supposed to pay “special, special attention” to air emissions on those days.

Brown and eight other current and former workers said that entailed closing the plant’s doors and keeping heavy equipment inside. Four workers recalled colleagues being reprimanded for taking dirty loader trucks outside when the monitors were running.

Brown and another former furnace supervisor, Cliff Burnett, said the company sometimes slowed production on monitoring days. On top of that, the company activated machines that shot water along its fence line. Gopher told regulators the devices, known as water mist cannons, were used to control dust during construction in 2015. But eight workers told the *Times* the company mostly used them to keep the toxic dust from reaching the monitors when the three devices were collecting air samples.

“Basically, you’re playing God with the monitors,” Brown said.

It’s unclear how much of the improvement in air-quality readings can be attributed to the company’s practices on air monitoring days, or how well the data reflect emissions when the monitors aren’t running.

Three air pollution experts told the *Times* that Gopher’s actions would likely impact the air readings by driving down “fugitive emissions,” the industry’s term for dust or fumes that escape outside of the smokestacks.

Perry Gottesfeld, a lead expert who’s visited smelters around the world as executive director of the nonprofit Occupational Knowledge International, likened the actions to “cooking the books.”

In general, if a company intended to interfere with government monitoring or deceive regulators, that could lead to violations of the Clean Air Act, said Craig Benedict, a former longtime federal prosecutor who specialized in environmental cases.

Companies repeatedly caught taking such steps to hide pollution have faced criminal prosecution, Benedict said.

Gopher, which has not been charged with any crime, did not answer specific questions about its practices on monitoring days. In a statement, the company said it follows all federal and state regulations.

“We are fully cooperative, transparent, and act with integrity in all our dealings with regulatory agencies,” the company said. “Any suggestion to the contrary is patently false.”

The experts also criticized regulators for having a monitoring system that could be so easily predicted.

“They should do random monitoring,” said William Landing, an environmental chemist at Florida State University. “If you really cared about the impact this plant



Stormwater flows into a creek near Gopher’s Tampa plant. In 2016, the company was fined for dumping contaminated stormwater into a drainage system that feeds into the Palm River. MARTHA ASENCIO-RHINE | Times



A calendar distributed at Gopher Resource in 2021 flagged the days regulators would be watching. Courtesy of a Gopher employee



Government regulators monitor the air quality around the factory using devices that resemble birdhouses. MARTHA ASENCIO-RHINE | Times

was having on the community, then that’s what you would do.”

Sterlin Woodard, who served as the county’s air division director until taking a new position within the agency last month, said the six-day schedule is based on guidance from the EPA. He acknowledged wondering before whether it could be manipulated.

“I’ve got concerns about it,” he said.

He said he was unaware of Gopher altering its practices on monitoring days. As reporters described details, however, Woodard said he wasn’t surprised.

“I figured they had something like that,” he said. “They know the rules; they know the standards.”

Later, Woodard said the *Times*’ reporting had prompted the county to probe Gopher’s practices. The county is now considering random monitoring, he said.

### Polluted water and hazardous waste

As Gopher worked to control air emissions, other environmental problems surfaced.

In February 2015, one of Gopher’s cannons shot water onto the property of a neighboring business, leaving the owner with burning skin, according to records. County officials sampled a substance left from the water on the ground and found high levels of lead, as well as cadmium and arsenic.

Gopher said a valve had malfunctioned, causing contaminated water to back up and flood into a water tank used for the cannons. The company added an alarm so the same thing wouldn’t happen again.

At the same time, Gopher was dealing with a separate water pol-

lution issue.

Each year, the factory is allowed to release hundreds of pounds of lead and other contaminants into the city’s sewer system. But Tampa limits the levels of certain chemicals Gopher can discharge. One of them is selenium, a naturally occurring mineral that can be toxic in large amounts to humans and animals.

From July 2014 to March 2015, Gopher far exceeded the discharge limits for selenium into the wastewater. That was problematic because the city removes solid materials from the water and treats them. A contractor takes the so-called sludge cake to farmers for their soil.

When the selenium spiked, Tampa’s sludge cake was being hauled to cattle ranches outside Orlando. The city became aware of the problem in Septem-

ber 2014 and stopped deliveries to the ranches the following month. Officials traced the increase back to Gopher, which acknowledged having trouble controlling the mineral. In 2015, Tampa charged Gopher \$180,892 for costs the city incurred by having to run additional tests on the sludge cake and dump it in a landfill, instead of sending it to the ranches.

Gopher’s problems with dirty water continued.

The state later determined Gopher had dumped contaminated stormwater into a drainage system that feeds into the Palm River and ultimately to Tampa Bay. In May 2016, Gopher entered into a consent agreement with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection that required the company to repair its systems, change its practices **See POISONED, 9A**

### Toxic factory

*Tampa Bay Times* reporters have spent more than two years investigating conditions inside and outside of Gopher Resource’s lead smelter. The factory has been a fixture in Tampa for decades and employs some 300 people, many of whom are Black or immigrants.

Here’s what our investigation has found:

- For years, Gopher exposed workers to dangerous levels of lead in the air. The levels were sometimes so high that they were considered life-threatening.

- Workers had alarming amounts of lead in their blood. From 2014 to 2018, hundreds had levels that put them at risk of increased blood pressure, kidney dysfunction or cardiovascular disease. More than a dozen had heart attacks or strokes

in the last five years. One died of kidney and heart disease at 56.

- Despite knowledge of high levels of lead dust inside the factory, Gopher turned off ventilation features meant to capture fumes and delayed repairs to broken mechanical systems. The company removed exhaust hoods, allowing toxic gases and metal fumes to seep into areas where people worked. And it failed to provide many workers with respirators that were strong enough to protect them in high-exposure areas.

- The company’s contracted doctor didn’t tell workers that their high blood-lead levels could put their health at risk. He also cleared employees to work even when they had health problems that

could be linked to lead exposure.

- Some workers unwittingly carried lead home in their cars or on the soles of their shoes, potentially causing exposure in at least 16 children. One child tested so high that her pediatrician recommended weekly monitoring.

- Lead wasn’t the only toxic metal Gopher struggled to contain. Cadmium also reached dangerous levels. Despite high readings of the metal, Gopher failed to meticulously track and document its presence in the plant. The company’s contracted doctor failed to follow up on tests designed to protect workers’ health.

- When the *Times* published its initial investigation in late March, the Occupational Safety and Health Administration

had not visited the plant in five years. During previous visits, its inspectors missed critical problems. Gopher repeatedly broke workplace rules while regulators were absent.

- After buying the plant in 2006, Gopher continued a decadeslong pattern of polluting the environment. It discharged contaminated water into the Palm River, sent too many chemicals into Tampa’s sewer system, and mishandled hazardous waste.

- The company has recently released less lead into the air than it used to. But Gopher has also taken specific steps to reduce emissions when it knows government regulators are watching. One expert likened that to “cooking the books.”

## POISONED continued from 7A

and pay \$8,000 in fines.

But two years later, regulators found another issue: For months, Gopher had improperly rerouted dirty well water into the stormwater tank.

Gopher made the required stormwater upgrades, which included building a new 2 million-gallon tank. The state closed its case last year, after giving Gopher two extensions to complete work.

Other problems have emerged with the way the company handles its waste, including a byproduct of smelting lead called slag.

Slag, which looks like lava and hardens into boulders, can be dumped in landfills. But slag that is determined to contain high levels of pollutants must be shipped to a special facility because the chemicals could leach into the groundwater. That's a particular concern in Florida, where groundwater is the primary source of drinking water.

At least twice in 2018, Gopher sent tons of hazardous slag to the Cedar Trail Landfill in Bartow and had to dig it up, according to records.

Both loads tested too high for barium, Gopher's lab tests showed. The toxic metal can cause vomiting, breathing difficulties and heart arrhythmias.

Then, in April 2020, Gopher discovered the top layer of a double liner beneath the building designed to contain dangerous chemicals was leaking, posing a threat to the soil and groundwater.

The company entered into a consent order with the Florida Department of Environmental Protection in January that required Gopher to find a permanent fix for the liner, send daily inspection data to the state and pay a \$9,710 fine.

The repairs were completed this past summer. But in October, another leak was detected.

### 'A lot of problems'

Much has changed about the neighborhood around the factory since Gopher came to town. What was once a small smelter has transformed into a sprawling 300,000-square-foot operation. The factory is now permitted to produce six times the amount



MARTHA ASENCIO-RHINE | Times

**Clarenine Williams has lived near the plant for 27 years and says she's still alarmed by what she sees.**

of lead compared to 15 years ago, when Gopher purchased it.

Gone are the Willow Creek mobile homes, at least seven houses and a smattering of businesses. The land they once occupied has been largely cleaned up. It belongs to the smelter.

Gopher says the air quality is now 80 percent better than EPA standards require.

But just as residents worried about contamination decades ago, they worry today.

Clarenine Williams has lived in a shotgun house within two blocks of the plant for 27 years. She said she's still alarmed by what she sees. She recalled spotting a "pale, vomit-green" cloud over the factory and watching a big fire several years back. Onlookers feared the plant would explode.

"That battery place has been a lot of problems for just about everybody," she said.

Residents and business owners have reported concerns to the county about metallic smells, their fear of lead infiltrating well water, and mysterious wastewater floods in Gopher's parking lot during the night.

Some complaints have been confirmed. Others were deemed inconclusive.

Sheris Mathews worked a few blocks away on East 14th Avenue. When she arrived at her business,

Nighthawk Towing & Repossessions, one morning in December 2018, she found a waterline broken and a white substance covering the ground. It resembled "slushy snow," according to records.

"It was all over my grass and all in the back of my property," Mathews told the *Times*. "We didn't know what it was."

After Mathews walked through the slush, she said, her black sneakers turned an orange-brown color, like they'd been bleached.

"That freaked me out," she said.

The waterline break was the third on her property and spilled roughly 4,000 gallons of sewage. Because she shared a line with Gopher, the wastewater included the factory's discharges.

Records show Gopher's wastewater turns into a snowlike substance on the ground. It contains sulfates, which crystallize as the water evaporates. Unofficial lab tests taken by county regulators showed elevated levels of lead, copper, selenium and zinc in the slush.

The issue was fixed, Mathews said, and she's had no other problems.

Other nearby residents have worried about the smell of drinking water. About factory alarms sounding and workers, outfitted in hard hats, lined up outside. About increased truck traffic, at

all hours.

They described semitrucks overturning and getting stuck in ditches along the narrow roads.

Jose Vazquez, who has lived and worked in the community for seven years and is known for launching bids for political office, decided to have his blood-lead level tested after reading the *Times'* initial investigation.

His levels, he said, came back elevated.

Vazquez is not sure whether the plant played a role, but he plans to investigate further.

"I need to figure out why," he said.

Meanwhile, two blocks down, the factory continues to hum, day and night, as dense clouds billow from its towering stacks.

*This story is part of a collaboration with FRONTLINE, the PBS series, through its Local Journalism Initiative, which is funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.*

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## Reporting that makes a difference

Since the *Tampa Bay Times* began reporting on dangerous conditions inside Gopher Resource's lead factory in March, government officials and community leaders have taken action.

Here's what happened so far:

- The Occupational Safety and Health Administration, which had not been to the factory in five years, conducted a six-month review that found Gopher willfully exposed workers to high levels of airborne lead. In September, the agency proposed \$319,000 in fines — one of the largest penalties in Florida in recent memory.

- Hillsborough County's Environmental Protection Commission conducted its own investigation and identified more than two dozen possible environmental violations at the plant. Fines are likely, the agency said.

- The company made a series of repairs and modifications to improve factory safety. Some of the work got under way after the *Times* began asking specific questions about long-standing problems inside the plant.

- A former worker sued Gopher alleging that, by working at the plant, he had unknowingly brought lead home and exposed his young son to the metal.

- A county commissioner held a town hall to discuss the health effects of lead for people who live around the plant. The county health department offered lead testing to local children.

- A national public health organization called for sweeping changes to the federal rules designed to keep lead workers safe.

- A global investment agency downgraded Gopher's credit rating.



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