

Smoke blankets Jamaica's capital as dump fire burns

March 12 2015, by David McFadden

Thick, noxious smoke blanketed Jamaica's capital Thursday as a wind-fanned fire burned at a sprawling, open-air waste dump on the city's outskirts that has seen repeated blazes.

Firefighters were trying to put out the fire as it billowed acrid smoke across Kingston and parts of neighboring St. Catherine parish. Schools closed and the government advised residents to stay indoors and close windows.

Authorities said they had the dump fire contained, though plumes of gray smoke increased and shifted direction on a breezy day. Some people who had to venture outside in badly affected areas of Jamaica's capital covered their nose and mouth with damp rags or handkerchiefs.

For years, the Riverton City dump has seen repeated fires, exasperating residents who are concerned about the health effects of breathing in smoke and microscopic pollutants. There's virtually no control over what is dumped, so all manner of industrial and commercial waste burns when fires start, often sparked by arsonists. The last major fire at the dump, in April 2014, burned for nearly two weeks and sent an increased number of people with respiratory distress to health clinics.

About three years ago, a government study found that alarming levels of [volatile organic compounds](#) were released by a blaze at the site managed by the National Solid Waste Management Authority. The cancer-causing chemical benzene was detected at three times the World Health

Organization's air standard.

After a 2012 fire, Environment Minister Robert Pickersgill acknowledged the situation affected [public health](#). But the dump continues to catch fire and the island's biggest city continues to be covered in smoke when it does.

Diana McCaulay, chief of the nonprofit Jamaica Environment Trust, said there has clearly been a longstanding failure to manage solid waste on the island.

"The dump fire is a serious risk to public health and it is simply not enough to say the [fire](#) will soon be out. The people responsible should be held accountable," McCaulay said in a Thursday email.

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