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Article published Feb 28, 2008

TCE found in groundwater at Ithaca Gun

DEC official says exposure not a risk, more testing needed

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ITHACA — Groundwater testing at Ithaca Gun has identified the presence of TCE above the standard established by the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

Samples were taken from three groundwater monitoring wells on the property in November 2007, said Mary Jane Peachey, a DEC engineer. Two of the three samples registered trichloroethylene, or TCE, readings above the state's groundwater standard of 5 parts per billion: one location between the factory and the smokestack was 152 ppb; one location near the smokestack was 98 ppb.

“The groundwater in this particular case is being monitored at a location 50 feet into rock. So exposure is not something occurring here on this site. That's a good thing,” Peachey said. “What this tells us is that there is a need to do a complete investigation up on the site itself.”

TCE readings at Ithaca Gun are nowhere near the levels found on South Hill near Emerson Power Transmission.

For comparison, in two groundwater samples taken by Emerson's consultants and reported to the DEC in December, TCE was found at 8,300 and 100,000 micrograms per liter, which equal 8,300,000 and 100,000,000 ppb.

Peachey said she does not know whether volatile organic compounds identified in the groundwater samples — TCE and breakdown products of TCE — have entered Fall Creek.

“It's difficult to say. There would need to be more monitoring to make that determination,” she said.

City planners, property owner Fall Creek Redevelopment and developers Travis & Travis were recently awarded a \$2.3 million state Restore NY grant to demolish the dilapidated gun factory. The city also hopes to receive an Environmental Restoration Program grant to remediate soil around the factory that is heavily contaminated with lead.

If a cleanup is successful, the developers plan to rebuild the site with 33 high-end condos and a public walkway from Lake Street to the gorge overlook.

The walkway and the island that overlooks Fall Creek would be gifted to the city.

Remediation plans have so far not included the potential for TCE contamination. Cleanup plans have focused on lead inside and outside the building and asbestos inside the building.

Like many industrial manufacturers in the last century, Ithaca Gun used degreasing solvents that contain TCE, a chemical now considered a likely carcinogen.

Local environmental activist Walter Hang has opposed the city's plan to attempt site cleanup using Restore NY funds, arguing that site cleanup will be much more expensive than the city expects.

The EPA spent \$4.8 million in a project between 2002-04 to remove lead from just portions of the property. The most heavily contaminated site, the island on the westernmost portion of the property, has never been remediated, and testing by Hang and The Journal in 2006 found that the steep slope just south of the island still contained high levels of lead and arsenic.

Removing a source of TCE contamination would inevitably add cost to the remediation.

Through a Freedom of Information request to the DEC, Hang found a study conducted in 1988 that documented volatile organic compound contamination inside the factory.

The report was prepared by Virginia-based Radian Corporation for Ithaca-based State Street Associates L.P., which at the time was considering purchasing the property and factory.

The report focused on lead and asbestos but also identified problem areas inside the factory, including the second-floor degreasing room, where 1,1,1-Trichloroethane, or TCA, was sampled at 4,200 parts per billion. TCA is a less harmful derivative of TCE.

The report also identified barrels of oily liquids and liquid that had seeped into drains, particularly in the oil/water separator drain and the shooting range seep.

After the 2006 fire at Ithaca Gun, those barrels were removed, Peachey said.

Peter Grevelding, senior vice president of Developers & Professional Services for O'Brien & Gere, the consulting firm hired by the Ithaca Gun developers, said once the building is removed, they will test under the building for potential sources of contamination.

"We are aware that there is lead on the walls of the shooting range and lead in the soil that is the dirt floor, and we are coming up with a remedial action work plan and submitting that to DEC for cleanup of the lead in the building. After the slab, the bottom of the structure, the slab is removed, we will test the soil for a full range of metals and chemicals," he said, including TCE and other volatile organic compounds.

Peachey said Restore NY money can be used to aid remediation under the building as well.

"When that building comes down, that will give us a wonderful opportunity to look for sources. You can still look for sources when buildings exist on site, but it is obviously easier when the building has come down," she said. "If we're fortunate to be able to locate a source of TCE, that will certainly assist with the groundwater, any remediation that might be necessary."

When Gov. Eliot Spitzer personally announced the Restore NY funding at a city hall press conference, he said, "obviously if things go over budget we'll have to step back and take a look, but we think this certainly should do it."

Ithaca Mayor Carolyn Peterson said she is confident the state intends to help the city clean the site completely.

"I think similar to other projects where there is state money allocated, many projects give their best guess

of the money needed,” she said. “I feel confident that the state's intention is to assist the City of Ithaca and the developer with completing the site cleanup both at the building and the land surrounding it to the condition we need to have a viable residential and park use up there.”

The city and developers have said that no demolition or remediation will take place unless they also receive funding from the Environmental Restoration Program to remediate sub-surface contamination at the site.

There is no word yet about whether the city will receive any money from that program.
