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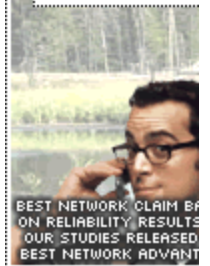
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Opinion - Monday, December 20, 2004

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Toxic pollution requires decisive action right now

EDITORIALS

The case of chemical pollution from the former Morse Chain plant above the City of Ithaca's South Hill neighborhood is anything but closed.

State conservation officials need to recognize the gravity of this problem, raise the priority of cleaning the area and provide residents with a clear plan of action -- including a timeline.

About 17 years ago, the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation identified pollution problems at the old Morse Chain plant, which today is owned by Emerson Power Transmission.

During its former production process of building specialized chains used in automotive transmissions, Morse used a solvent, trichloroethylene, or TCE, to clean oils and grease from the products. Scrap metals bound for recycling plants were stored in bins behind Morse's South Hill plant. Over the years, chemicals from the scrap leaked from the bins and into the ground, where it made a decades-long subterranean journey into the lots -- and even basements -- of many homes in the City of Ithaca's South Hill neighborhood.

The state conservation department studied the site from 1987 and 1994 and concluded that all contaminated soil was removed. Yet South Hill residents and the current owner of the industrial facility, Emerson Power Transmission, have continued to find evidence of TCE contamination throughout the years.

In April, the problem emerged again after South Hill residents told city officials that they were concerned that a project to enlarge Spencer Road



Photo by Walter Hang, Toxics Targeting

A 55-gallon barrel that once contained methyl chloroform, a form of trichloroethane or TCA, is pictured last week on the hill behind Emerson Power Transmission.



could unleash TCE that had been spilled decades before. Mayor Carolyn Peterson responded by ordering soil tests in the area. Subsequent tests found additional TCE.

The state now has classified the Emerson-South Hill site as a "Class Four" site, defined as, "properly closed-requires continued management." That definition essentially means that conservation officials need to continue any cleanup activities.

Experts such as Walter Hang of Toxics Targeting strongly recommend that the state upgrade the site from Class Four to Class Two. A Class Two site poses "significant threat to the public health or environment -- action required."

Hang is correct. State officials need to reclassify the site as a Class Two or higher because the danger from TCE still remains. City road workers have said they typically see an oil sheen on the road and surrounding soil when they work there. Last week, South Hill residents showed a Journal reporter old, rusted 55-gallon drums in a wooded area below the plant site. Several barrels were labeled as containing -- or having contained -- trichloroethane, TCA.

The more people look at South Hill, the more evidence of chemicals they find.

"Clearly the pollution migrating away from the site has not been controlled," Hang said. "It's literally migrating into the indoor air of people's homes. It is literally flowing into streams. It is not properly closed. Additional action is clearly required to define the full scope of the problem and clean it up once and for all."

If the state conservation department does not have the resources to handle this problem, perhaps it is time to seek help at the federal level from the Environmental Protection Agency, as the city did in the case of lead pollution that remained from the former Ithaca Gun plant near Ithaca falls.

The state can no longer bury this problem like an old barrel. It needs to take decisive action, once and for all for the sake of people living on South Hill.

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