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Environmental mess: DEC response is promising

The state Department of Environmental Conservation struck first.

Responding to a Journal story earlier this week that detailed how documents show a history of contamination at the former Wallace Industries site on Cherry Street in Ithaca, DEC Commissioner Peter Grannis moved swiftly by saying the agency would be investigating soon.

We noted in this space on Wednesday that the DEC and its cleanup colleagues at the federal Environmental Protection Agency tend to act slowly when it comes to remediation efforts in our area. Remediation efforts for the former Morse Chain plant on South Hill (now owned by Emerson Power Transmission) have taken more than a decade. On another hill, the EPA spent about \$4.8 million of taxpayer money to clean up the former Ithaca Gun site but still hasn't finished the job even though they told us otherwise. The cleanup at Ithaca Gun began after Walter Hang of Toxins Targeting Inc. identified lead contamination in 2000. When The Journal reported last year that the cleanup was never completed, the city reacted sluggishly to fixing the problem but is now hoping state grants will jumpstart remediation efforts. The EPA hasn't said publicly what, if anything, it will do to help.

Tuesday's action by the new DEC commissioner shows that the agency has the right idea of how to deal with the environmental mess we have here. It reminded us of when the DEC moved quickly to remediate the South Meadow Street area where perchloroethylene — a common dry cleaning solvent commonly known as perc — was found in September 2005. That remediation effort was done within weeks.

On Tuesday, Grannis committed to testing soil at the former Wallace site. Documents show that oil from scrap metal stored at the site seeped off piles and into the nearby Cayuga Inlet. The inlet feeds Cayuga Lake. Some of that scrap metal was delivered to Wallace by the former Morse Chain.

The DEC is already conducting multiple investigations in connection with Morse Chain's usage and dumping of trichloroethylene, or TCE. Those investigations include the cleanup of at least 21 possibly contaminated storage drum sites at the former Morse Chain site, the remediation efforts under way at homes on South Hill and the monitoring of the low levels of TCE found recently at the Ithaca Police Department, Ithaca City Court building and higher levels found on police property across the street. TCE is suspected of causing cancer and other illnesses in humans.

Emerging public documents about the Wallace site and surrounding area strongly support the conclusion that TCE was dumped on the property. The DEC believes it should test the soil to find out. (Elsewhere on this page you'll find a letter from current site owner Bill Reamer who details how business is conducted there now).

We applaud the agency's quick commitment and urge Assemblywoman Barbara Lifton, who talked to Grannis about the Wallace site, and state Sen. George Winner to pressure the DEC to follow through on the timetable Grannis promised.