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Local News - Wednesday, June 2, 2004

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# DEC wants more spill site tests Roger DuPuis II

By Journal Staff

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ITHACA -- The State Department of Environmental Conservation has requested additional testing be done around a toxic spill site in the city, while neighbors have banded together to request more information about the pollution.

DEC Region 7 Engineer Mary Jane Peachey said on May 28 that Emerson Power Transmission will, at DEC's request, perform vadose zone testing around areas potentially affected by decades-old toxic solvent spills around the company's plant. The vadose zone is the area between the surface soil and the groundwater table.

Emerson's plant, formerly Morse Chain, is on Danby Road, high above a residential neighborhood. Though first discovered in 1987, some residents were not aware of the toxins issue until it was the subject of media coverage last month.

South Cayuga Street resident Joyce Muchan said neighbors have been collecting names for a petition that is to be sent to the DEC this week, seeking more information -- and individual notification -- about the spill and its aftermath.

Between 75 and 80 names have been collected from three streets, Muchan said.

Peachey said vadose zone testing has been done before -- in the period after 1994, when the DEC issued a record of decision approving remediation steps to be taken in response to years of trichloroethylene leakage around the plant.

TCE, as it's commonly known, was used until 1983 to clean grease from chains made at the factory.

Last month, Walter Hang of Ithaca-based Toxics Targeting called on the DEC and Emerson to revamp the existing remediation process after a consultants' study done for Emerson showed high levels of TCE still persisted in some spots as recently as December 2003.

New York's standard for TCE in groundwater is five parts per billion. Hang said the consultant's study showed 28,000 parts per billion last December.

"It's something that we believe needs to be done," Peachey said of the vadose tests. She explained that groundwater levels change over time, and doing new tests will help assess contaminant levels in the area.

She cautioned, however, that the test results Hang referred to do not necessarily signal a problem with the cleanup system now in place. The readings he cited were made not at monitoring wells but recovery wells, she said, where the system works to extract contamination. It would not be uncommon to find elevated toxin levels at those well sites, Peachey said. And if the system is working properly, levels should drop off sharply away from the wells.

Paid for by Emerson, the tests should begin in early or mid-June, Peachey said, and lab results take four to six weeks to process.

Hang said May 28 that he has not yet received a formal response from the DEC.

Muchan said the core group of organized residents plans to elect a public spokesperson shortly. Some have spoken with Assemblywoman Barbara Lifton (D-125th District), who's also seeking more answers.

"Right now, I don't know whether there is cause for alarm here or whether everything that should be done is being done," Lifton said, adding that the figures Hang cited concern her.

Collaborating with city and county officials, Lifton said she plans to hold a public meeting sometime this week.

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**Originally published Wednesday, June 2, 2004**



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