

Seeley: Dump poses environmental threat, agency says

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 DEC have revealed that parts of the Seeley Creek dump are still contaminated.

Soil between Seeley Creek and the dike in the area behind Southtown Plaza and McDonald's has already undergone one cleanup, Mehta said, but the area is still heavily saturated with lead and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) from one to eight feet beneath the surface. PCBs are a toxic liquid often used as an insulator in electrical equipment. Levels of cadmium and nickel are also high. PCBs are known to cause liver, stomach, kidney, skin and reproductive organ damage in animals. Lead can damage the central nervous system, kidneys and immune system. Both are classified by the U.S. Department of Health as probable carcinogens, or cancer-causing agents.

PCBs are dangerous if ingested because they accumulate in body fat. In 1997 tests, the DEC found traces of PCBs in the fish at the creek, but the fish there are small — often only about 6 inches — and are generally considered too small to eat, Mehta said. The PCBs do not seem to have accumulated in area mammals.

But it's still a possibility. "The important thing is the food chain," Mehta said. "PCBs can move from one species to another."

A 1989 DEC public health assessment done at the dump identified several possible pathways that contamination could reach people. The most likely path would be people eating fish or game contaminated with PCBs or other wastes.

But the DEC report stated that although contaminants could potentially transfer to people and accumulate in their bodies, "the likelihood is extremely remote."

The public health assessment calculated the risk of cancer and other health problems by using a worst-case scenario: regularly eating dirt with the highest concentrations of toxins for 70 years.

For every 1,000 people exposed to the site for more than 70 years, the DEC estimates that 5.46 additional cases of cancer would result. No significant increase would occur in other health problems.

Dump didn't worry neighbors

No one knows what kind of health risk the dump was in its heyday, when its existence was not a concern to residents of the neighborhood between the factory and the creek.

Ronald Bower, 61, grew up on Charles Street and Oakdale Avenue. Now he lives a block away on Shannon Avenue. "That dump has always been there," he said. "I remember all the barrels of rubber dust, fluorescent lights and coolant. I spent most of my high school days down there shooting birds."

Bob Schneider, 63, of Curren Road, Elmira, remembers dumping at Seeley Creek a few times when he worked in the maintenance department at Remington Rand from 1955 to 1957. He also saw other employees take loads there regularly from the factory.

"They would take big 55-gallon drums of paint stripper and paint almost every day and dump it at the creek," Schneider said. "They did nickel and chrome plating at the factory and the chromic acids went down there, too."

Schneider also remembers other wastes dumped there: fluorescent light tubes, a fuzzy substance sprayed inside typewriter cases for sound and impact absorption, waste paper, rubber shavings, sand and metal shavings.

Francis Meyers, 55, grew up on Shannon Avenue just south of the factory and now lives on King Road. He saw barrels taken to the Cedar Street dump on the north side of Seeley Creek, along with typewriter parts and metal frames. He never saw any liquids dumped there.

Bower and Schneider both remember playing with the garbage itself. "There were fluorescent tubes down there by the thousand, and when I was a kid, I used to go down there and pop them with a BB gun," Schneider said.

Bill Fuller, 62, grew up on Hudson Street and now lives on Shannon Avenue. During the 1950s, he said he and his friends used to swim in the creek and steal corn from a nearby field to roast over a fire. He worked at Rand in the 1960s.

Liz Enlow, 32, of Oakdale Avenue, recalls swimming in the creek and seeing cleanup crews. "I saw (cleanup workers) walk around down there in big yellow suits to clean it up, when we used to be down there all the time in bathing suits," Enlow said.

History of dump site

Dumping began at the 70-acre farm site when it was owned by Michael and Mary McMerney in the 1940s, according to DEC documents.

According to correspondence between the Chemung County Health Department and DEC, the site was used in its early years for disposing of oily waste, pallets, paint wastes, metal chips, coal ash and possibly wastes produced in chrome and nickel plating. Later, the company dumped primarily coal ash.

Over the last 20 years, the DEC has tested, cleaned and studied different parts of the site.

- In 1983, the DEC added the northern half of the site to the state's Registry of Inactive Hazardous Waste Disposal Sites. Contamination was not known to be a health threat at that time.
- In 1987, Southport Correctional Facility construction workers discovered buried barrels containing lubricants and chemicals on the southern part of the property. The site was identified as a "significant threat to the public health or the environment."
- The cleanup of the Southport prison area was finished before the prison opened, according to the DEC.
- In 1993, 10,255 cubic yards of contaminated surface soil was excavated from the creek area. Nearly 9,100 tons of soil and debris were removed as hazardous waste. In addition, 213 drums and containers were found and removed; 36 were classified as containing hazardous waste.
- The south side of Seeley Creek and the surface of the north side was cleaned up by 1994, Mehta said.

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