

Industrial tannery dump contaminates drinking water in west Michigan community

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Industrial waste from a decades-old west Michigan tannery dump has contaminated drinking water in the area surrounding Plainfield Charter Township, located just north of Grand Rapids. According to officials from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), the levels of certain toxic chemicals in residents' drinking water is "off the scale," and may be among the highest ever recorded in the United States.

Plainfield Charter Township is among a number of cities and communities across the United States, including Flint, Michigan and Martin County, Kentucky, that have had their drinking water poisoned by corporate malfeasance and government indifference.

The tannery dump was owned and operated by Wolverine World Wide, a footwear manufacturer based in Rockford, Michigan that produces Wolverine, Merrell, and Hush Puppies brand shoes. Records relating to the site indicate that it was used as an industrial sludge dump from 1938 until the 1970s. According to DEQ documents, Wolverine dumped sludge daily at the site throughout the 1960s.

The waste was dumped into unlined trenches and covered with dirt, where it proceeded to work its way down into the groundwater supply. The sludge is highly contaminated with perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) and perfluorooctane sulfonic acid (PFOS), chemical compounds which are used in the waterproofing of leather. Though nearly all US residents are exposed to some level of PFOA and PFOS chemicals, high levels of chronic exposure have been linked to severe adverse health effects.

According to an Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) fact sheet, PFOA and PFOS exposure has been linked to kidney and testicular cancer, liver tissue damage, damage to the thyroid and the immune system, developmental delays in children, and a number of

pregnancy complications, including pregnancy-induced high blood pressure, low fetal birth weight and fetal skeletal variations.

After a group of Rockford-area residents urged DEQ officials to investigate the site in January 2017, an investigation revealed that well water in the vicinity of the dump had combined PFOA and PFOS levels many times greater than the EPA's official health advisory level of 70 parts per trillion.

In numerous cases, levels as high as several thousand parts per trillion have been recorded. One resident's well water contained a level of 58,930 parts per trillion combined PFOA and PFOS, which, according to MLive.com, is "believed to be highest level of those two chemicals found in drinking water anywhere in the country — possibly the world."

PFOA and PFOS compounds do not degrade naturally in the environment due to their long-chain chemical structure. They are bioaccumulative and can build up to dangerous levels in humans and animals through persistent exposure over time.

In addition to the primary sludge dump, there are at least two other sites in the area that are known to have been dumping grounds for Wolverine tannery sludge. Local farmers may also have been using Wolverine's lime-heavy sludge as a crop fertilizer, further contributing to the spread of the toxins. The scope of the investigation has widened to include nearby Algoma Township and the city of Rockford. Attempts to study the extent of the contamination have been hindered by the fact that the Michigan DEQ has not conducted its own thorough investigation, citing severe budgetary restraints. Instead, it has relied on Wolverine to carry out its own testing and provide results.

Meanwhile, residents have been forced to face the stark reality of life without access to clean tap water.

Residents have been warned not to drink the water, cook with it, or even give it to animals. Wolverine has provided some residents with bottled water and under-sink filters in an attempt to save face and deflect residents' anger. Meanwhile, in comments to local media outlets and on social media groups, residents have expressed anger and fear over the toxic water that many have been drinking for decades.

On the "Demand Action from Plainfield Township" Facebook page, many residents discuss instances of cancer in the area, while others have expressed outrage over the lack of governmental response. A constant theme is the lack of confidence in the regulatory bodies that are supposedly charged with protecting residents' drinking water. One resident stated, "We must insist on continuously testing all the water that enters our aquifers and the Great Lakes Watershed and of course the municipal water we drink. Meeting DEQ and EPA standards is no longer an answer we should blindly accept."

One resident, Sandy Wynn-Stelt, who lives across the street from the tannery dump, was forced to pay \$800 for her own blood test after her insurance company would not cover the cost. She found that the level of PFOS in her blood was 3.2 million parts per trillion, about 750 times the national average. She has blamed the water contamination for the death of her husband, who died of cancer in 2016.

Two former residents of Rockford, Ashlee and Doug Naffziger, have blamed the contaminated water for pregnancy complications that led to the death of their newborn child in 2015. While pregnant, Ashlee Naffziger suffered from severe pregnancy-induced hypertension, a condition linked to PFOA and PFOS exposure.

"I think that if (Wolverine) would have disposed of it properly we wouldn't be sitting here," Doug Naffziger told Mlive.com. "For all I know we could have our 3-year-old here." The Naffzigers, Wynn-Stelt, and dozens of other residents are suing Wolverine for its role in the water contamination, while Plainfield Township itself is suing the company for costs related to extending the township water supply to cover areas affected by the contamination, a project that is estimated to cost \$25 million. Wolverine's 2016 total revenue was approximately \$2.5 billion.

No serious actions have been taken to provide

residents with a long-term clean water supply, nor has there been any investigation into the health effects of decades of exposure to these industrial toxins. As the water crises in Flint and Martin County, Kentucky have shown, the fight for clean water cannot be conducted by seeking redress through the courts, which produce only wrist-slap fines in even the most egregious pollution cases. Residents likewise cannot place their hopes in elected officials, who serve the corporate polluters and work to shield them from any accountability.

The resources required to make residents whole, including a multi-billion-dollar infrastructure project, free lifetime health care, and compensation for decimated home values, can only be secured through an overturning of the capitalist system that serves corporate polluters like Wolverine and the reorganization of society on a socialist basis.



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