Uranium contaminated site collapsed into the Detroit River during the Thanksgiving holiday

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The shoreline of a Detroit, Michigan property contaminated by uranium and other chemicals dating back to the 1940s collapsed into the Detroit River during the Thanksgiving holiday weekend. The public was not alerted to the existence of the toxic spill until a report was published this week by the local paper in Windsor, Ontario.

The property known today as the Detroit Dock was previously owned by Revere Copper and Brass, Inc., a provider of uranium rods for US nuclear weapons development during and after World War II.

According to a report in the *Windsor Star* on Thursday, the property has been listed by both the US Department of Energy and the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) as a contaminated site for decades. It has also been listed by the *Wall Street Journal* as one of the country's forgotten nuclear legacy "waste lands" where "potential exists for significant residual radiation."

The *Windsor Star* report said, "The riverbank apparently collapsed under the weight of large aggregate piles stored at the site by Detroit Bulk Storage which has a long-term lease on the property for such use."

The *Star* report also said the collapse of the site—which is adjacent to the property of the historic colonial-era Fort Wayne and the narrowest stretch of the Detroit River between the US and Canada—"initially remained unknown to many responsible state and federal environmental regulatory agencies" because of the holiday weekend.

Responding nearly a week after the incident, a spokesman for Michigan's primary environmental agency issued a statement, "Any time the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes, and Energy (EGLE) learns of incidents such as the one at the Revere Copper site in Detroit, staff is greatly concerned about the impact on water quality and the public."

The official added, "EGLE staff will evaluate what is known about the conditions onsite, look into whether there are any environmental concerns, and determine what, if any, obligations the property's owner has, before we decide our next steps."

Meanwhile, representatives of the US EPA were unaware of the collapsed shoreline when contacted by the *Windsor Star*. The agency officials said that federal responsibility for the former Revere Copper and Brass site "belongs with the U.S. Department of Energy which was tasked decades ago with oversight of dangerous properties that feature nuclear or radiation histories across the US—especially those connected with war-related equipment."

Initially, representatives of Detroit Bulk Storage did not respond to media inquiries although heavy equipment was seen moving crushed stone around near the collapsed bulkhead on the waterfront. Subsequent reports said that Noel Frye, owner of Detroit Bulk Storage, claimed he was unaware of the environmental history of the property until the shoreline collapse.

Among the major concerns about this alarming event is the impact it will have on Detroit's water supply. The city has water intake lines a short distance downriver from the Detroit Dock collapse.

As pointed out by Derek Coronado of Windsor's Citizen's Environmental Alliance, aside from the uranium, beryllium and thorium in the contaminated soil that fell into the river, the disturbance of the sediment on the bottom of the Detroit River is a major

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concern. Coronado told the *Star*, “Sediment in that area is loaded with a cocktail of chemicals that include mercury, PCBs and PAHs which all have negative health implications for humans, wildlife and the water.”

Coronado added, “But the volume of stuff (aggregate) that went into the river would cause resettlement of the contaminated sediment which is really not good. Moving that stuff around will spread contamination and cause greater destruction to what’s in the water.”

Michigan government environmental officials moved in quickly on Friday to test the water in the Detroit River and down play the risks from the spill. A report in the *Detroit News* said, “State testing at the site of a southwest Detroit dock collapse found radiation levels that fell below what is considered naturally occurring levels in Michigan, indicating there is no danger to public health, according to the state environmental agency.”

The *News* also reported, “The Great Lakes Water Authority believes the two intake sites several miles upstream and several miles downstream of the collapse are in no danger of contamination from the incident. ‘… the intake is located on the Canadian side of the Detroit River and is not in the direct flow stream of the river where the land collapsed,’ the authority said.”

Other experts have been quoted saying that the risks of harmful radiation exposure from the uranium is very low. The *News* reported, “Uranium generally is harmful when ingested in large amounts, which could affect kidney function. It’s unlikely that’s the case for this incident.”

However, with Detroit residents already on alert from the experience of lead contaminated water in Flint, Michigan beginning in 2014, no one is going accept the word of environmental officials that Detroit water is safe and that no one should worry about radiation poisoning.

Canadian officials have expressed concerns about the handling of the situation by state of Michigan and US government officials. New Democratic Party politician Brian Masse, the member of parliament who represents much of Windsor, has called for an “immediate binational investigation” of the collapse that includes both national governments.

Revere Copper and Brass was a subcontractor for the Manhattan Project—the secret US program for the development of the atomic bomb—and extruded and machined uranium and thorium rods for nuclear weapons development in the 1940s and 1950s. Between 1943 and 1944, 1,220 tons of uranium was extruded at the site and Revere abandoned the site in 1985.

The Detroit riverfront property collapse—with its connections to US-Canada relations, the failure of government oversight of environmental safety and the history of American industry going back to the heyday of its technological, economic and military supremacy in the era of World War II—is a microcosm of the crisis facing the working class across the country under capitalism.

While billions of dollars are being invested in Detroit by real estate speculators and the auto corporations with the expectation that enormous financial returns will be realized, the conditions of life for the city’s working class population are becoming ever more precarious and deadly.

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