

# Cancer-causing chemical spills onto Detroit-area freeway over Christmas holiday

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A known cancer-causing chemical spilled onto the I-696 interstate in the Detroit suburb of Madison Heights, Michigan, on Friday, December 21, forcing the shutdown of a freeway lane amid public concerns of contaminated groundwater.

The bright green-yellow substance was discovered by motorists oozing out between concrete slabs in the retaining wall and onto the shoulder of the eastbound lanes of the freeway that runs east and west in the northern suburbs of the Motor City. A cleanup operation by local police, firefighters and HAZMAT teams was underway through the Christmas holiday.

A statement from Macomb County Public Works Commissioner Candice S. Miller late Friday evening said that “engineers and staff are working with state and federal agencies to monitor a bright green material that is seeping on to I-696 in Madison Heights.”

State environmental officials later reported that the oozing substance is hexavalent chromium—also known as Chromium (VI), Cr (VI) or Chromium 6—which leaked from the basement of a shuttered company called Elektro-Plating Services, Inc. and mixed with ground water.

They said that the toxic chemical ran from the basement into the ground and then through a storm drain that empties onto the highway. Once the ooze emerged from the drain, it froze into a greenish-yellow blob.

Elektro-Plating Services, Inc., located on 10 Mile Road with the rear of the building facing the I-696 interstate, was closed in 2016 by government regulators. The owner of the site, Gary Sayers, was tried and sentenced to a year in federal prison and ordered to pay \$1.4 million to clean up the plant last month for operating an unlicensed hazardous waste storage facility.

Jill Greenberg of the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy (EGLE), was quick to say on Sunday that the spill is not impacting air quality or drinking water. “We are operating under the presumption that this is groundwater contaminated with chromium from historic plating operations,” she said in a statement.

However, no one knows how long the substance has been leaking from the Elektro-Plating Services building since 2016, and there is speculation that the chemical is on its way into Lake St. Clair and the Great Lakes freshwater system by way of storm drainage sewers. Tricia Edwards of the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) said on Monday that the cleanup is going to take time because there is a lot of clay in the area, and the substance is traveling onto the clay.

Hexavalent chromium is the chemical featured in the 2000 film *Erin Brockovich*, directed by Steven Soderbergh and starring Julia Roberts, which depicts the exposure of the groundwater contamination by the energy corporation PG&E in Hinkley, California, that poisoned the public.

The US Department of Labor’s Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) says exposure to Chromium 6 is known to cause the following adverse health effects: “occupational asthma, eye irritation and damage, perforated eardrums, respiratory irritation, kidney damage, liver damage, pulmonary congestion and edema, upper abdominal pain, nose irritation and damage, respiratory cancer, skin irritation, and erosion and discoloration of the teeth.”

OSHA also says, “Some workers can also develop an allergic skin reaction, called allergic contact dermatitis. ... Allergic contact dermatitis is long-lasting and more severe with repeated skin exposure. Furthermore, contact with non-intact skin can lead to ulceration of

the skin sometimes referred to as chrome ulcers. Chrome ulcers are crusted, painless lesions showing a pitted ulcer covered with fluid.”

OSHA characterizes hexavalent chromium compounds as a carcinogen, noting, “The risk of developing lung, nasal, and sinus cancer increases with the amount of hexavalent chromium inhaled and the length of time the worker is exposed. Studies of workers in chromate production, chromate pigment, and chrome electroplating industries employed before the 1980s show increased rates of lung cancer mortality. Certain hexavalent chromium compounds produced lung cancer in animals that had the compounds placed directly in their lungs.”

Elektro-Plating Services was using cyanide, chromium, nickel, chloride, trichloroethylene, and various acids and bases, as part of the plating process. Plating is a method of coating metal for decoration, corrosion inhibition and to harden, reduce friction, alter conductivity or other purposes. Electroplating is a very common method that uses an electrical current passed through a chemical bath in which a metal product is submerged and the plating material is adhered.

The Madison Heights spill is further evidence that government environmental safety and health regulations and enforcement are criminally inadequate. Small time operators such as Sayers—who dug an open pit in the basement of his facility to dump electroplating waste—are insufficiently inspected, given a slap on the wrist for massive violations, and the government “clean-up operation” leaves the scene with a toxic chemical time-bomb waiting to go off.

The Christmas chemical leak comes just one month after the collapse of the Detroit Dock bulkhead that spilled uranium-contaminated soil into the Detroit River over the Thanksgiving holiday. This spill went unnoticed by US and Michigan environmental authorities until it was brought to their attention by reporters from the *Windsor Star* newspaper across the Detroit River in Ontario, Canada.

These recent spills, just as the lead contamination crisis in Flint, Michigan, did on an even wider scale in 2014, point starkly to the crisis and decay of the capitalist system and the threat it poses to the life and well-being of working people.

Any number of presently unknown man-made environmental catastrophes have been left behind by

the deindustrialization of the past four decades. As the financialization of society decimated the manufacturing infrastructure and the political establishment—with the support of the unions—attacked government regulatory and social service programs, the brunt of this decay has been foisted upon the working class.



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