

Hexavalent chromium contamination likely leaking onto Detroit-area freeway since 2016

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The toxic leak onto a Detroit-area freeway discovered by motorists before Christmas has likely been seeping into the soil and groundwater since 2016, according to a report in the *Detroit Free Press* on Monday.

The *Free Press* made the determination after conducting its own analysis of Google Street View images of the location where the green-yellow substance froze into a blob on the shoulder of the service drive of the eastbound lanes of the I-696 interstate on Friday, December 20.

The report notes, “Google Street View images of the area on the freeway ... show what appears to be a small stream of clear liquid draining from the wall in the same spot beginning in at least July 2016. The amount of liquid seeping out appears to be increasing in an August 2018 photo, and even more in a photo from May 2019. There appears to be a small amount of greenish liquid at the base of the wall in the May photo.”

Indicating that the seeping of the chemical onto the freeway shoulder began sometime in 2016, the *Free Press* report says, “The pavement appears dry in eight Google map images of the spot taken at various times between 2008 and October 2015.”

The evidence of the chemical leak in the Google Street View images was brought to the attention of the *Free Press* by a reader on the newspaper’s Facebook page.

After the right lane of the freeway was closed on December 20 and a cleanup operation began, state and federal environmental officials determined that the chemical was the highly dangerous hexavalent chromium, also known as chromium-6. Officials said the leak was coming from the basement of a metal plating factory just above the freeway embankment that had been shut down in December 2016 by regulators for numerous hazardous waste violations.

Hexavalent chromium is a known cancer-causing chemical that humans should never come into direct contact with. As pointed out recently by Erin Brockovich, the activist for whom the 2000 Hollywood movie of the same name was made about her battle with PG&E over the poisoning of Hinckley, California with the chemical, 200 million

Americans are exposed to unsafe levels of the heavy metals in their drinking water.

In an email to the *Guardian* in 2016, Brockovich said, “The water system in this country is overwhelmed and we aren’t putting enough resources towards this essential resource. We simply can’t continue to survive with toxic drinking water.”

On November 6, Gary Sayers, the owner of Electro-Plating Service, Inc. of Madison Heights, Michigan was sentenced to one year in federal prison and ordered to pay \$1.45 million in restitution for what was supposed to have been the cleanup of the site after it was closed in 2016.

As is clear from a press release by the US Attorney’s office at the time, Sayer’s storage of the hazardous chemicals in the basement of his facility was well known. It says, “Sayers stored the hazardous waste in numerous drums and other containers, including a pit dug into the ground in the lower level of the EPS building in Madison Heights. For years, Sayers stonewalled state efforts to get him to legally deal [with] the hazardous wastes. Ultimately, the EPA’s Superfund program spent \$1,449,963.94 to clean up and dispose of the hazardous wastes.”

The DOJ release also explains, “In 2016, the MDEQ identified over 5,000 containers of liquid and solid wastes at the Madison Heights location. That same year, the city of Madison Heights revoked the company’s occupancy permit. In January 2017, the EPA initiated a Superfund removal action, after determining that nature and threats posed by the stored hazardous waste required a time-critical response. The cleanup was completed in January 2018.”

It is now clear that the federal government cleanup operation was never completed. Meanwhile, the “Superfund removal action” taken in 2017 and 2018 may well have contributed to the leak that has been poisoning the soil and groundwater in the area for the past three years.

According to the *Free Press*, a Michigan environmental official said that the original cleanup was designed to remove the “imminent threat” to health and safety. However, the report added, “investigators didn’t figure on

the basement of the factory gradually becoming a hidden reservoir of contaminated liquid, growing with rain and groundwater to become a small geyser seeking an outlet.”

Jill Greenberg of the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy (EGLE)—who was previously quick to assert that the leak posed no danger to air or drinking water quality—said of the *Free Press* analysis that her agency “can’t draw any scientific conclusions from these images” but would include them in its investigation.

State and federal environmental officials confirmed a week after the leak was discovered that soil and water samples taken from beneath the metal plating factory and the freeway embankment showed, “high levels of multiple contaminants.” The right lane of the freeway as well as an exit ramp remain closed indefinitely while the cleanup and testing operation continues.

A press release from EGLE said that water samples from storm sewers near the site showed levels of hexavalent chromium at 0.14 milligrams per liter, slightly higher than the standard for safe drinking water of 0.10 milligrams per liter. The water tests also revealed high levels of other contaminants including trichloroethylene (TCE) and cyanide which were used in the plating factory. Soil tests from the freeway embankment showed chromium-6 and “multiple heavy metals and other contaminants,” although at levels not considered hazardous for human contact.

The EGLE press release placed blame for the expanding disaster entirely upon Electro-Plating Services saying the “contaminated liquid... migrated off-site onto the Interstate-696 freeway shoulder last week.” EGLE said that next week the US EPA will be taking more soil borings to determine how severe the contamination is and how far it spread.

Another major concern is that the storm sewer system eventually drains into Lake St. Clair, which is to the east of the northern and eastern Detroit suburbs. On this question the EGLE statement said that concentrations of the chemicals in the lake system would be “well below detectable levels although still a significant concern for incremental accumulation in the ecosystem.”

Outrage by the public continued to be expressed through social media with blame for the environmental contamination being placed squarely on the government. Pointing to the fact that there have been extensive freeway improvements made recently on I-696, including at the location of the leak, some expressed concerns about the workers in the area who may have been exposed to the cancerous chemicals.

One reader posted on the *Free Press* Facebook page, “The brand new area of the freeway, All the fill dug out of that

area, all the contractors exposed, the transfer of chemicals on the equipment that worked there, the dump sites it was hauled to, the expressway flooding and torrential rains all summer. The extent of damage is much more far reaching than we will ever know.”

Another reader said, “And the government has been involved for years, many years. This is either gross negligence or incompetence, or both. Somebody has to be held accountable. Where is our governor and the attorney general when you need them?”

Going into damage control mode, Michigan Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer issued a belated statement on Monday, attempting to place blame on the Republicans, saying the Madison Heights chemical leak shows, “the need for broad reforms to address problems of critical underfunding and understaffing at the department following eight years of one-party control in Lansing.”

The fact is that both the Democratic and Republican Parties have cooperated for decades in attacking government regulation and oversight of capitalist enterprises in Michigan and across the country from the smallest parts manufacturing firms to the largest automotive corporations in the world. With the support of the United Auto Workers union, the capitalist politicians and their paymasters in the corporate board rooms have incessantly attacked the wages, benefits, social services and health and safety of the working class going back to the bailout of Chrysler in 1979.

Now, along with the growth of unprecedented income and wealth inequality in the US, the working class is confronted with regular and repeated revelations that the earth, air and water they rely on have been contaminated through a combination of deregulation, criminal negligence and budget cuts in the interests of private profit.



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