PFAS contamination found at Detroit-area plating company site leaking cancer causing chemicals

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Michigan state environmental officials have revealed that tests near the site of a three-year toxic chemical leak at a Madison Heights industrial facility show PFAS contamination of surface water along with previously established hexavalent chromium contamination of the ground water.

The *Detroit News* reported on January 17 that the Michigan Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy (EGLE) had tested the storm sewers and Bear Creek near the location of the shuttered Electro-Plating Services and found the presence of PFAS contamination.

PFAS (perfluorinated alkylated substances or polyfluoroalkyl substances) are a group of synthetic chemicals associated with stain repellent and polishes, paints and coatings manufacturing going back to the 1940s. Also known as "forever chemicals," some PFAS compounds are no longer made in the US because of their persistence, toxicity and widespread occurrence in the general population and wildlife.

The well-known manufacturers of PFAS are 3M and Dupont in their nonstick surface products such as Scotchgard, Teflon and food wrappers. In recent years, major class action lawsuits have been filed and won against these and other companies in Ohio, Minnesota and New Jersey related to PFAS-contaminated drinking water and the adverse health effects from public exposure to the chemicals.

Among the health issues associated with PFAS are high cholesterol levels, ulcerative colitis, thyroid disease, testicular cancer, kidney cancer, tumors of the liver and pancreas and pregnancy-related hypertension and preeclampsia. In February 2018, 3M settled an $850 million lawsuit for contaminating the drinking water and natural resources in Washington County, Minnesota, southeast of the Twin Cities.

The *Detroit News* reported that EGLE said the new contamination "is not directly connected to the shuttered Electro-Plating Services and two other buildings off E. 10 Mile now under state and federal scrutiny." One of the PFAS compounds—known PFOS (perfluorooctanesulfonic acid)—was detected in Bear Creek at 17.9 parts per trillion (ppt), exceeding the acceptable level of 12 ppt. Bear Creek flows into the Clinton River and then into Lake St. Clair.

Jill Greenberg of EGLE told the *News*, "Now that we saw we got a positive test, we're going to do additional samples. We're testing in stages and we're going to definitely expand that so we can just determine the extent of where that might be present."

EGLE issued a press release on January 10 stating that a formal reevaluation of the Electro-Plating Services site is being sought with the US EPA Superfund program. The PFAS-contaminated Bear Creek water samples along with other water and soil samples from around the facility analyzed by the EPA are the basis for the eligibility application.

The press statement says that the water in the basement of the Electro-Plating Services building—the source of the hexavalent chromium leak that was discovered oozing onto the shoulder of the I-696 freeway on December 20—also contains PFAS. Water samples collected by a sump pump in the factory's basement pit "contained levels of PFOS—one of the PFAS compounds—at a level of 742 parts per trillion (ppt), above Michigan's groundwater standard of 70 ppt."

Officials continue to insist that the expanding

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chemical contamination crisis "is not a concern for drinking water intakes in Lake St. Clair." They reported six rounds of drinking water intake testing last showed that PFAS were not present or at very low levels at the plants that draw water from Lake St. Clair, including Mt. Clemens, Ira Township, Grosse Pointe Farms, and New Baltimore.

On January 13, EGLE also reported that Gary Sayers, the owner of Electro-Plating Services—and who is serving a prison sentence for persistent environmental violations—also owns a facility in Detroit with similar pits of liquid in the basement that resemble the green-yellow substance found at his Madison Heights building.

EGLE officials are testing liquids taken from the various pits in the Detroit plant, "to determine the types of waste/contaminants to ensure appropriate and proper disposal." However, even before any testing has even been done, EGLE was quick to add, "The area is served by municipal water and EGLE is not aware of any wells that could be subject to contamination. The site is several miles from municipal intakes in the Detroit River. Once the pits are emptied, EGLE can determine if the pits have leaked into the environment and assess next steps."

The January 13 EGLE statement also reported that 4,000 gallons of contaminated groundwater were pumped from the vicinity of the Madison Heights location during a recent rain storm and "Since the sump pumps were installed by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) around Christmas, they have recovered more than 20,000 [gallons] of contaminated liquid."

Growing public concern over the toxic waste site has caused EGLE to announce a public briefing on the contamination scheduled for Monday, February 3 from 6-8 p.m. at Madison High School, 915 E. 11 Mile Road. The meeting is being hosted by the City of Madison Heights, Congressman Andy Levin, State Sen. Jeremy Moss, State Rep. Jim Ellison and Oakland County Executive Dave Coulter.

Clearly, the expanding evidence of environmental contamination has exposed the blatant violation of hazardous chemical handling laws by a small-time industrial operator or group of operators as well as a complete lack of government oversight and enforcement.

That Sayers was permitted in the first place to dump chemicals in the basement of his building and then—after Electro-Plating Services was closed by the EPA and Sayers charged with a crime—a multimillion dollar government "cleanup" never actually took care of the problem, speaks volumes about the nature of the capitalist profit system.

At each stage of the present crisis, the public has been told by government environmental officials that the extent of the contamination is nothing to worry about, only to learn that there is far more chemical poison in the ground and water than had previously been admitted.

Decades of attacks by Democrats and Republicans alike on industrial regulation, infrastructure and maintenance, and environmental and safety training, combined with support for low-wage jobs and destruction of healthy working conditions, have produced the present situation. The working class in the Detroit area and other cities throughout the country can only defend the basic right to decent jobs and wages, safe workplaces and a healthy and livable ecosystem free of chemical contamination through the class struggle and the fight for socialism, in which society will be reorganized to meet human need and not private profit.

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