Michigan lifts “no contact” recommendation two weeks after spill of toxic chemicals into Huron River

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Two weeks since toxic and carcinogenic chemicals were dumped into the Huron River by Tribar Technologies, an auto parts company in Wixom, Michigan, officials lifted a “no contact” recommendation with river water after a state investigation indicated below safety standard concentrations of the chemicals in question.

The spill took place on the evening of Friday, July 29, but was not reported by the company until the afternoon of Monday, August 1, according to an investigation report published by Michigan’s Department of Environment, Great Lakes and Energy (EGLE) last Friday. The Huron River flows for 130 miles through southeastern Michigan, passing through major urban areas, including Ann Arbor and Ypsilanti, before emptying into Lake Erie.

About 10,000 gallons of wastewater containing 3892 pounds of hexavalent chromium were released from Tribar’s Plant No. 5 and flowed through the Wixom Wastewater Treatment Plant before entering into Norton Creek and the Huron River. Hexavalent chromium, widely used in industrial production, is known to be toxic and cancer-causing and can damage many of the body’s organs.

If most of the untreated hexavalent chromium had flowed through the Huron River, it would have become a major threat to the water safety of the more than three million people downstream, including those in Ann Arbor, which draws drinking water from the river.

EGLE has organized testing of water samples collected along the river from Wixom to Barton Pond of Ann Arbor since Tuesday, August 2. Among the 146 samples collected over the course of four days, three samples came back with positive signs of hexavalent chromium. Two of these samples were collected from Hubbell Pond in Milford, with concentrations of 11 parts-per-billion (ppb) and 9 ppb from the surface and the bottom of the lake respectively. The third sample was from surface water in Kent Lake with a concentration of 5 ppb.

In six other water samples, total chromium (sum total of hexavalent chromium and the relatively less toxic trivalent chromium) was also detected. These samples were also collected from Norton Creek and Kent Lake with concentrations ranging from 1.1 to 2.5 ppb.

Per guidelines from the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), drinking water’s standard for total chromium is 100 ppb. As the detected concentrations of chromium in all samples are lower than the EPA standard, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) assessed that it does not constitute a risk for human health and lifted the recommendation for no contact with Huron River water announced on August 2, a day after the Tribar release was reported.

The EPA chromium standard used to be 50 ppb, which was consistent with the current guideline value suggested by the World Health Organization (WHO), but was raised to 100 ppb in 1991. At the same time, California Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment (OEHHA) established in 2011 that the Public Health Goal (PHG) for hexavalent chromium should be 0.02 ppb, orders of magnitude lower than the EPA standard and the measured concentrations of chromium in Kent Lake and Hubbell Pond samples. Determination of this PHG concentration was based on estimates of the amount of hexavalent chromium in drinking water that “would pose no significant health

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risk to individuals consuming the water on a daily basis over a lifetime."

Commenting on this vast discrepancy between the EPA and PHG values, Marc Edwards, the Professor of Environmental and Water Resources Engineering at Virginia Tech University who played a critical role revealing the Flint lead crisis, told the WSWS, "[T]he EPA determined that the health risks are acceptable for most people if the water is below 100 ppb, but the issue of what is truly 'safe' is always in the eye of the beholder."

The EGLE report explained that the relatively low concentrations of hexavalent chromium found in the Huron River is a result of the fact that most of the disposed chemicals remained in the Tribar plant. The investigation found that four units of granulated activated carbon (GAC) in Tribar were clogged with an estimate of 1,500 pounds of chromium. As a result, the liquid discharged into Wixom's sewage system contained 0.12 percent chromium. Out of the 4000 pounds released at Tribar, about 300-400 pounds of chromium reached the city's Water Treatment Plant, where more than three quarters of the chemical were filtered out.

During the investigation, Tribar attempted to attribute the blame to a single employee and present it as the result of their unexpected actions. The company stated that the discharge of chemicals was carried out by a tank operator who had stayed in the plant after it was shut down on Friday night.

The tank operator was said to have overridden waste treatment alarms 460 times over the period of three hours, letting hexavalent chromium discharge before proper treatment. The company has not explained why the operator remained in the facility after hours, whether he or she reported an issue to anyone during this period, or why the employee was able to override the alarm so many times. Tribar only stated that the tank operator already resigned before Monday morning.

The company claims that it will implement a new system at the plant so that management will be notified should another override of waste treatment be carried out in the future. Officials from EGLE said in interviews that Tribar has been vague in providing more information and a full timeline of what happened to investigators.

Residents have every right to remain skeptical about the investigation's results, especially given the record of Tribar itself, as well as the role played by state officials in past water safety disasters. State environmental and health officials claimed in early 2015 that water in Flint was safe to drink despite the water's foul smell and the eruption of skin and respiratory symptoms among local residents. In fact, the predecessor of EGLE, the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ), was complicit in the cover up of the Flint water crisis when it first broke out.

Tribar itself also has a notorious history of polluting the Huron River and criminally neglecting the health and safety of local residents. In 2018, and again this February, the company was responsible for the pollution of the Huron River and local soil and livestock with another toxic and cancer-causing chemical known as PFAS (per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances). Tribar has faced virtually no consequences and is counting on being let off the hook again.

As of this writing, neither Democratic Governor Gretchen Whitmer nor Representative Haley Stevens, whose 11th District includes Wixom, has made any public statements on the Tribar spill. Representative Debbie Dingell, from the 12th District, which includes Ann Arbor, made a statement on August 6 that very briefly mentioned "holding Tribar Technologies fully accountable for all damages and for endangering our environment and our communities." No executives from Tribar have yet been charged or arrested for the spill or for their previous pollution.

Even if residents along the river have dodged being contaminated by a heavy dose of highly toxic chemicals, the sheer luck that most of the chromium stayed within the Tribar Plant does not in any sense reduce the company's criminal indifference for the health and safety of millions of people.

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