

Chemical leak at AdvanSix plant triggers shelter-in-place in Hopewell, Virginia

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On September 15, the city of Hopewell, Virginia issued a shelter-in-place warning after chemical manufacturer AdvanSix reported a leak of oleum at its massive 200-acre facility. Oleum is a fuming sulfuric acid that is extremely toxic to humans and the environment.

It is the fourth such leak in the past year at AdvanSix, situated near residential neighborhoods and other major industrial facilities along the James River. It is also the second emergency since the end of a strike in which workers spoke of dangerous short-staffing, high turnover, and 18-hour shifts.

Just after 8 a.m., September 15, the Hopewell Fire Department posted on Facebook that crews were dispatched to the industrial plant: “There is currently a chemical leak at AdvanSix. There [are] NO hazards to the public at this time. Personnel are working to contain the leak. Updates will be sent as soon as available.”

No further details were provided to residents for over an hour about the type or severity of the leak. Around 9:30 a.m., the city posted a company-issued news release declaring the situation had cleared with “no risk to community from AdvanSix release.”

On June 28, a leak of liquid ammonia forced the plant into a late-night lockdown. Employees at AdvanSix as well as at the nearby WestRock paper mill and Ashland chemical plant were ordered to shelter in place while emergency crews worked to stop the leak. Two workers were reportedly treated for injuries at the scene, but the company released little else about the situation. AdvanSix has vociferously downplayed such accidents and the dangers they posed to workers, the community and environment. The city government, dependent on its chemical plant tax base, largely echoes corporate press statements.

The latest leaks come in the wake of the betrayal of a

five-week strike by workers at the Hopewell plant in April and May. The workers are members of four separate unions, which operated to keep them divided and undermine their demands for higher wages and limits on the savage work schedules imposed by the company, which threaten both workers’ health and the safety of the surrounding community. The AdvanSix workers rejected three different contract offers brought back by the unions before finally voting to go back to work after a company ultimatum.

AdvanSix is a global nylon producer. Its Hopewell operations are of strategic significance to the capitalist economy and the United States’ domination over its rivals. According to the company’s website, the Hopewell facility is “one of the world’s largest single-site producers of caprolactam,” used in nylon polymer in plastics, tires, clothing, carpets and seat belts. The production process of caprolactam results in noxious byproducts, including adipic acid and ammonium sulfate.

Hopewell’s AdvanSix plant is also “the world’s largest single-site producer of ammonium sulfate fertilizer,” integral to large-scale grain agriculture. Russia—the world’s largest supplier of many fertilizer components, including potash, ammonia, nitrogen and phosphate—has been consumed by the US-stoked war in Ukraine and crippled by economic sanctions. The war has disrupted Russian ammonia exports via a key pipeline and port in Ukraine, impacting the manufacture of fertilizers elsewhere, as well as the production of basic plastics, textiles and other chemicals throughout Europe and internationally. As a result of ensuing shortages and price increases, American chemical corporations have reaped record profits.

An International Energy Agency report found

demand for chemicals used to produce plastics and fertilizer has outpaced that of all other bulk materials, including cement, steel and aluminum, doubling since 2000 and on track to rise even more steeply as developing economies adopt practices common in the US and Europe.

The *Richmond Times-Dispatch* reported in April that the Hopewell plant “has been flagged 66 times in the past eight years for violations of the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act.” Over the past two years, AdvanSix has violated the federal Environmental Protection Agency’s air quality laws every month.

The Virginia Department of Environmental Quality has cited the plant for illegally releasing over 390 tons of sulfur dioxide in the past decade, misreporting levels of nitrogen runoff into the James River and releasing benzene, ammonia and hydrogen sulfide.

In March, the plant released a “mist” of 7.23 tons of sulfuric acid from equipment that inspectors had long ago ordered repaired. According to the *Times-Dispatch*, AdvanSix’s machinery had released 113 times the state limit of sulfur dioxide every year.

Until 2016, AdvanSix was part of Honeywell; before Honeywell, the Hopewell plants were part of Allied Chemical—the company notorious for the 1975 Kepone disaster that destroyed wildlife habitat in the James River for decades.

Hopewell is an industrial city of 23,000 south of Richmond. Established in 1613 as City Point, upriver from the Chesapeake Bay at the confluence of the James and Appomattox rivers, the settlement was strategic from the time of the earliest colonies through the building of the railroads and the Union’s victory in the final battles of the Civil War. In the industrial boom that followed, Hopewell became an attractive location for chemical manufacturing operations. The town had a poor black and immigrant population available for work, plentiful waterways and rail lines, and next to nothing in the way of regulations.

From 1966 to 1975, Allied Chemical produced Kepone in Hopewell. Producing three tons daily, Hopewell was the world’s only source of the toxic insecticide. With no regulatory oversight, Allied Chemical pumped massive amounts of the DDT-related pesticide directly into the river. It wasn’t until 29 workers from the facility were taken to the hospital—shaking uncontrollably, suffering bouts of blindness

and “dancing eyes syndrome”—that state regulators stepped in. Environmental scientists estimated that 200,000 pounds of Kepone had been dumped into the river and surrounding area.

The recent accidents at AdvanSix come in the midst of a surge of industrial disasters in the US driven by corporate greed, disintegrating infrastructure and lack of regulatory oversight. This year alone has witnessed the catastrophic train derailment in East Palestine, Ohio, which rendered homes uninhabitable and poisoned the Ohio River watershed. Major chemical spills and fatal industrial leaks followed in Pennsylvania; a toxic fire at an Indiana recycling facility forced residential neighborhoods to shelter in place.

AdvanSix workers and Hopewell residents are being exposed to chemicals that cause cancer, burns and severe cardiovascular and pulmonary damage. Chemical runoff has created dead zones in the river. Life expectancy in Hopewell is five years lower than the state average. According to the *Times-Dispatch*, the city’s cancer mortality rate is “nearly double the state average, and its rates of hospitalization for asthma stand at three times the Virginia norm.”

AdvanSix has been fined minuscule amounts and allowed to continue operations on promises of fixing broken equipment and self-reporting problems. In fact, the company has a permit with the state that legally allows it to dump over a million pounds of nitrogen into the James River every year. The fines are effectively a cost of doing business. Last year, the company was fined \$55,000 for hazardous leaks. In its 2022 financial report, AdvanSix boasted a revenue of \$1.94 billion, with “record annual sales, earnings, and cash flow.”



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