To: Graber, Nathan (HEALTH)[nathan.graber@health.ny.gov]
From: Evangelista, Pat
Sent: Wed 1/27/2016 2:06:07 PM
Subject: Hoosick Falls

Good morning Nathan, please see article below, particularly portion highlighted in yellow, and let me know your availability to discuss for a few minutes. Thanks.

Albany Times Union

Pollution plume grows in Hoosick

Secrecy in toxic test disclosures as school leader criticizes state health officials

By Brendan J. Lyons

January 27, 2016

Hoosick Falls

Traces of a toxic chemical have been found in multiple private wells in the town of Hoosick since last summer, but town officials said they were told by the state Health Department to keep the information private.

The disclosure of the test results comes as several banks in Hoosick Falls have suspended mortgages and refinancing applications in the affected area with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency examining whether portions of Hoosick Falls should become a federal Superfund site.

The examination of the water pollution has centered on the Hoowick Falls village's municipal well system that services several thousand customers. But the toxic chemical, perfluorooctanoic acid, or PFOA, has also been detected in private wells on the outskirts of the village in the town of Hoosick. The findings have raised concerns about the extent of the underground pollution.

PFOA has been found to cause certain types of cancer and thyroid diseases, among other health problems. Many residents, including a local physician, said there have been high incidences of aggressive forms of cancer and other health problems in the village, although no formal studies have confirmed that.

The suspected source is a Saint-Gobain Performance Plastics manufacturing plant that's about 400 yards from the village well fields. The company purchased the plant in 1999 and PFOA was used there by Saint-Gobain and several predecessor companies for decades.

The recent test results show PFOA levels from very low to higher than what federal guidelines recommend. The samples were taken from private wells at homes and businesses, according to copies of state lab reports obtained by the Times Union. People familiar with the matter said the state Health Department began testing private wells last summer.

In an email sent to the Town Board on Jan. 19, Hoosick Supervisor Mark Surdam forwarded the results of lab reports showing PFOA levels in about 18 private wells, but he cautioned board members to keep the information private.

"Please remember there are privacy issues that we have to be aware of," Surdam wrote. "All owners will be contacted by NYS Health Dept. It is up to the owners to share their own info if they choose to do so."

Many of the test results showed levels of PFOA well below the 400 parts per trillion level set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. But Surdam noted that guideline "is likely to come down from what we have been told, but no one knows what that number may be."

The EPA has said the 400 ppt level is for "short-term" exposure, and not intended as the standard for water supplies used by people for long periods.

In addition, EPA officials said the 400 ppt level is expected to be lowered significantly in the coming months.

On Tuesday, Surdam said his concerns about keeping the results private were the result of a directive from the Health Department. He said he would like the privacy provision waived going forward so that everyone knows where PFOA contamination is a problem.

"I understand it, but there's two sides to it," Surdam said. "Some people might not want their information known but at the same time ... this information needs to be available. ... If you're going to sell your house it has to be disclosed."

The recent Health Department tests showed trace levels of PFOA in the well-water supplies at a diner, an apartment complex and the Hoosick Falls school district's bus garage, which is about a mile from the school campus. The well water at the bus garage is used to wash buses and has not been used for human consumption in many years, in part, because of unrelated pollution problems there, school officials said.

School Superintendent Kenneth Facin said he had difficulty getting the test results on the bus garage and was infuriated the Health Department sent the results to the Town Board.

Facin said he called Health Department officials last week and asked why he hadn't received the results first. After several telephone calls he said the Health Department sent him the lab report and a cover letter that included conflicting information about the level of PFOA in the bus depot's well. Of the 18 or so private wells tested recently, the bus garage had the highest level — 412 ppt — which the EPA considers unsafe for human consumption.

Still, the Health Department's cover letter did not include any warnings about the levels detected at the bus garage.

"They did not even advise me as to what restrictions come with an elevated PFOA test," Facin said. "They don't offer recommendations in their official correspondence. The Health Department seems to be in over their heads on this issue as nobody seems to be taking this seriously. I have had enough of this nonsense."

Facin said the district has authorized him to have the school's water tested monthly at a private

lab going forward. The decision was made, in part, because the Health Department recently said it was not equipped to re-test the school's water.

"The Health Department has gone to a water testing lottery for residents outside the village as communicated to me by several people who have called (the state) for water testing," Facin said.

JP O'Hare, a Health Department spokesman, said the state has tested 25 wells "in phases, working outward from areas known to have PFOA in drinking water."

"Of the 25 wells sampled to date, nine had no detectable PFOA," O'Hare said. "Levels in nearly all of the remaining 16 samples were low, ranging from 9 parts per trillion (ppt) to 412 ppt. The single well that tested above 400 ppt was the school bus garage. According to the school district, the water at the bus garage has not been used for drinking or human consumption since 1997."

David Engel, who represents one of the families whose residential well tested positive for PFOA, said his clients were concerned because their well initially tested with a level of more than 150 ppt and state Health officials told them it was safe for consumption.

"They were at a level no reasonable person would deem to be appropriate for long-term exposure," Engel said, declining to identify the residents. "The DOH told them it was OK to use the water. Since that time the DOH has switched its position on that issue."

Meanwhile, the concerns about the water pollution led several banks to curtail their mortgage and refinancing business in and around Hoosick Falls.

"I think like pretty much everybody over there we have indefinitely suspended current mortgage lending in the affected area," said Kevin T. Timmons, a spokesman for Trustco Bank. "I think everyone has. We do consider it temporary. ... Our hearts really do go out to everyone effected by it."

Timmons said Trustco officials are exploring ways to donate money to affected residents and examining whether any governmental programs would allow Trustco to resume its lending in that area. He said there are government-backed guarantees similar to those used in areas impacted by natural disasters, such as hurricanes.

"Obviously, as a bank we look to the customer to repay and the value of the collateral is critical," he said. "An environmental issue may be an ongoing issue."

Therese J. Myer, a spokeswoman for KeyBank, said their lending decisions in that area are also undergoing increased scrutiny.

"We are still lending in the Hoosick area, however as with all lenders, mortgages and refinances go through an appraisal process," she said. "Each appraisal is handled on a case-by-case basis to ensure certain criteria are met, and access to potable (drinkable) water is one of those criteria."

Surdam, the town supervisor, said he's bracing as the concerns about the water pollution reach outside the village.

"We do not yet know how far this extends into the town," Surdam said. "The town is really just starting now to take this up. This last round of results from the Department of Health, that's obviously a big thing. It's got our attention on the town level as far as now we're going to have to deal with it. I am losing sleep at night figuring out our next steps."

Photo: John Carl D'Annibale

Mayor David Borge oversees the delivery of a temporary filter system at the village of Hoosick Falls water treatment plant on Tuesday. (John Carl D'Annibale / Times Union)

Workers take delivery of a temporary water treatment system Tuesday Jan. 26, 2016 in Hoosick Falls, NY. (John Carl D'Annibale / Times Union)

Kenneth Facin, superintendent at Hoosick Falls Central Schools, said he had difficulty getting well-test results from the state Health Department. (John Carl D'Annibale / Times Union)