EPA pushes for deep study of Hoosick Falls water pollution

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Federal agency warns water polluted with chemical PFOA is not safe for villagers to drink

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Hoosick Falls

A toxic chemical that contaminated the Hoosick Falls water system may have seeped into the village's underground wells over a period of decades when workers at a nearby plastics plant cleaned smokestack filters and other equipment on the ground outside the facility, including flushing manufacturing byproducts into a storm drain.

In addition, several people who worked at the McCaffrey Street plant, owned by Saint-Gobain Performance Plastics since 1999, recalled how a powder-like smoke plume that seemed heavier than air often settled in the valley around the small plant that overlooks the Hoosic River. The facility is several hundred yards from the village's water treatment plant.

David Hassel, a retired mechanical engineer who worked at the plant beginning in 1975, said he helped design the oven stacks that were part of a high-heat process used to produce Teflon-coated materials ranging from heat-resistant wiring to small clips used to treat varicose veins. Last year, Michael Hickey, a village resident whose father worked at the plant for decades and died of kidney cancer in 2013, sent samples of the water to a Canadian laboratory that found elevated levels of a man-made chemical, perfluorooctanoic acid, or "PFOA," in the village water.

The findings stoked suspicions of many village residents who say their small community has experienced an extraordinary wrath of cancer, including rare and aggressive types of the disease. Thyroid diseases and other health problems also have appeared more common, according to Dr. Marcus E. Martinez, who runs a bustling family medica practice in the village.

"I don't think the information about the toxicity and PFOA were even known by the chemists at the time," said Hassel, who battled prostate cancer and had an office at the McCaffrey Street plant from 1976 to 1985. "If they (the health risks) were known, they were probably kept secret."

Hassel said in the early 1980s, the plant, which was owned by five different companies since it opened in 1956, installed "scrubbers" in its smokestacks that were designed to prevent toxic pollutants from entering the air. He said the PFOA was in a powdery manmade substance, PTFE, that helped alter the molecular structure of the products they were making so they would withstand heat and repel grease, oil and water.

"The powder got on everything around the equipment and in the ovens they used at McCaffrey Street to bake blocks of Teflon, and in the towers used to fuse Teflon," Hassel said.

Kevin Allard, a former Village Board member who also worked at the plant for many years, said workers used to clear the scrubbers and heating towers every Monday, washing the equipment on the side of a hill outside the plant, about

400 yards from the village's most productive underground well. Other former employees interviewed by the Times Union recalled similar practices, which may have violated environmental laws.

More Information

PFOA contaminant

Perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA), also known as "C8," is a man-made chemical used to manufacture non-stick and other household and commercial products that are heat-resistant and repel grease and water. Under an agreement with the U.S. Environmental Protection agency, major manufacturers of PFOA began phasing out use of the product in 2006.

PFOA exposure to humans comes from water, air, dust, soil and consumer products. PFOA does not break down in humans and bioaccumulates over a period of years.

PFOA exposure can lead to increased health effects, including testicular and kidney cancer and thyroid disease.

Sources: C8 Science Panel; U.S. EPA; state Department of Health.

"The other thing you have to remember is scrubbers probably didn't catch everything," Allard said. "Before the scrubbers were put on there was a good 15 years of running full-out and all that material going up into the air, up out of the stacks and just floating down. It was heavier than air."

Judith Enck, regional administrator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, said state officials and federal regulators are discussing plans to fully assess the situation in Hoosick Falls. Last week, the EPA issued a statement reaffirming its position that no one should drink or cook with village water until the contamination is removed. The agency issued its warning four days after the Times Union reported that village leaders had declined to advise people not to drink it, with the mayor saying it was a "personal choice." The mayor was relying, in part, on the state Health Department, which handed out a "fact sheet" to residents two weeks ago stating "health effects are not expected to occur from normal use of the water." The mayor and state Health Department abruptly changed their stance last week.

Enck, who is from Rensselaer County, also wrote a letter to village Mayor David B. Borge in late November advising residents not to drink the water. But the message was not distributed by the village until last week, after the correspondence was made public by a grass-roots group led by Hickey, who's credited with discovering the contamination.

On Friday, Enck said state and federal agencies are in early discussions about how to undertake an investigation in Hoosick Falls, which may include health surveys.

"We need a comprehensive assessment to determine what is the source of the pollution and how do you handle it," she said. "It's not enough just to give people alternate drinking water supplies and put a carbon-filtration system on the water plant. You need to find the source of the pollution and work to remove it or contain it. That has to happen by either a state agency or a federal agency, or both."

The small village, which has about 4,500 consumers on its water system, has been home to a number of factories and manufacturing plants dating to the early 1800s. Saint-Gobain operates the village's two remaining manufacturing plants, which employ about 200 people, including 65 village residents.

Julia DiCorleto, a general manager who oversees Saint-Gobain's Hoosick Falls plants, said the soil-testing the company conducted around the McCaffrey Street plant showed low levels of PFOA in the soil, which may indicate the water pollution came from a source other than their plant. But the company's tests also showed extremely high levels of PFOA in the groundwater under the plant site, which includes an aquifer that is believed to feed the village's

nearby underground well system.

"I can't really say what went on in the '70s and '80s; I wasn't there, I don't know," DiCorleto said, adding that the company ceased using PFOA in 2003. "Saint-Gobain is a company that's been around for 350 years and we have a very strong commitment to the environment and health and safety."

Saint-Gobain, a French-based manufacturing company, is providing free bottled water to village residents and has pledged to install a $2 million carbon filtration system on the village's water plant, which officials said should remove the PFOA. Company officials said their decision to provide help to the village does not represent any acknowledgement of responsibility for the PFOA pollution.

"We just do not know what the source of the PFOA is," said Dina Silver Pokedoff, a Saint-Gobain spokeswoman. "It could have come from a number of places, and we're just not in a position to speculate on what that source may be or if it's us or other companies that operated in that site or other areas. We just don't know."

Last Monday, Robert A. Bilott, an Ohio attorney who is helping represent an estimated 3,500 people in a class-action lawsuit against DuPont, which manufactured and used PFOA in its products, wrote a letter to Borge and the state Health Department urging them to change their position on the health risks of PFOA in drinking water. Bilott said he's represented "tens of thousands of individuals in various communities across the country who have been injured because of the contamination of their drinking water with PFOA."

Bilott said a science panel that was formed as a result of the litigation with DuPont conducted a comprehensive study of the health effects of exposure to PFOA and issued a peer-reviewed report that concluded the chemical has a "probable link" to six diseases: kidney cancer; testicular cancer; ulcerative colitis; thyroid disease; preeclampsia/pregnancy-induced hypertension; and medically diagnosed high cholesterol. DuPont paid for the study by a group of scientists known as the "C8 Science Panel," and, as a result of the panel's findings, the company has to concede in the personal-injury lawsuits that PFOA causes cancer.

Recently, one of the first cases to go to trial resulted in a $1.6 million judgment for a woman who lost a kidney attributed to PFOA exposure. Five other cases in the class-action litigation are scheduled to go to trial beginning next year, unless the case is settled.

"These levels of PFOA in the village's drinking water present a health concern, not only because they exceed the current short-term EPA drinking water advisory, but because they represent levels of PFOA that are significantly above the threshold levels of PFOA exposure where the C8 Science Panel found links with six very serious diseases, including two forms of cancer," Bilott wrote in the letter.

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