

LOCAL

Farmers concerned about spread of Southport industrial pollution. DEC responds



Jeff Murray

Elmira Star-Gazette

- Residents along Coldbrook Creek in the Town of Southport have raised concerns about pollutants from Elmira High School, which sits on a former industrial site, washing into their neighborhoods.
- Some local farmers, including the owner of Bradley Farms on Maple Avenue, are now raising similar concerns.
- In response to a letter to Gov. Kathy Hochul, DEC said it is working on the issue but has no time frame for remediation.

Dan Hurley has always had suspicions about contamination from a former industrial site where Elmira High School now sits.

Hurley, who owns the 200-acre Bradley Farms on Maple Avenue in the Town of Southport, said the company responsible for cleaning up the high school property even ran tests on his land, but nothing ever came of it.

It wasn't until Hurley heard from a friend, Joann Siedman of Raecrest Circle in Southport, that he became alarmed. Siedman told him of [documented contamination that washed onto her property from nearby Coldbrook Creek](#), which also flows past the high school site.

Now Hurley says it's time for the state to do something about contamination that could end up spreading well beyond the original source.

"Coldbrook Creek is 100 yards from here," Hurley said from an office at Bradley Farms. "It dumps into Seeley Creek. Seeley dumps into the Chemung River."

The state Department of Environmental Conservation has been aware of the issue for several years and said it's working on solutions, but has not offered a timetable for cleanup.



A toxic legacy in Southport area

When what was then Southside High School was built in the late 1970s on South Main Street, along the border between the City of Elmira and Town of Southport, nobody seemed concerned at the time it was constructed on land that had been used for industrial purposes for more than 100 years.

But for at least the past 30 years, [officials have been aware of lingering industrial contaminants at the site](#), and DEC worked with Unisys, the last owner of the property before the Elmira City School District, to remediate the pollution, including trichloroethylene and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs).

Only in recent years have concerns been raised about those contaminants spreading beyond the high school property, primarily via Coldbrook Creek.

"I've known all along we had issues," said Seidman, who contacted environmental consultant Walter Hang after reading a Star-Gazette story about a [neighborhood's concerns over pollution from a former Agway fertilizer plant](#) in the Town of Big Flats.

Hang, who founded Ithaca-based Toxics Targeting and now runs Environmental Health Research Group, worries toxins could be spreading for miles beyond the original site of the pollution.

"I believe large stretches of Coldbrook Creek actually have levels of PCBs that constitute hazardous waste because the New York state 50 parts per million regulatory requirement is exceeded," he said. "This is mind-boggling."

Coldbrook Creek also runs past Notre Dame High School, but school officials said that the DEC tests school property every year and hasn't found any major issues.

But a 2023 letter from Geosyntec — the consultant hired by Unisys to investigate contamination issues — to Notre Dame indicated

concentrations of PCBs, cadmium, chromium, copper, and nickel found in soil samples exceeded the residential Soil Cleanup Objectives (SCOs).

SCO exceedance doesn't necessarily indicate an immediate health hazard, the letter stated, but it recommended following state Health Department guidelines for reducing potential exposure.

Given those findings, school officials are hiring their own consultant to advise how to make sure students and staff are kept safe.

Landowners wait for answers on contamination spread

Hurley isn't the only landowner downstream of Elmira High School waiting to learn more about what toxins might be on his property.

Farmer Craig Weed raises livestock and a variety of vegetables on his land, which is near Bradley Farms. Weed said Geosyntec, the firm hired by Unisys to test properties for contaminants, contacted him in 2017 asking for permission to take samples on his property.

"They came there several times. 2003 was the last time, and they had students with them," Weed said. "They gave me (information) packets. I didn't understand them. I assumed everything was fine."



Weed made that assumption until he showed the documents to Hang, who said they indicated high levels of PCBs and chromium.

Weed said his cattle drink from Coldbrook Creek, which he said has spread and created swampy areas after beavers dammed the flow.

Weed also sent meat from some of his slaughtered cattle to be tested, and while the results came back "safe for human consumption," Hang said the data confirmed the presence of some level of PCBs in the fatty tissue.

Weed said without more information, he's concerned about his own health, even though he doesn't live on the property.

"I live in West Elmira, but I'm there (in Southport) five days a week," he said. "My brother died of cancer five years ago. I don't know if it's linked to that."

DEC addresses concerns, admits cleanup will take time

After speaking with Big Flats residents concerned about the former Agway plant, Hang sent a letter to Gov. Kathy Hochul demanding action but said there was never any response.

He wrote to Hochul again about Southport contamination issues but this time, Hochul passed the request on to DEC Region 8 Director Timothy Walsh and asked him to address Seidman's concerns.

Walsh sent Seidman a letter telling her DEC and the state Health Department are committed to ongoing cleanup of the Elmira High School site, Coldbrook Creek and surrounding properties.

"Several investigations have been completed on residential and commercial properties to delineate the nature and extent of COPCs (compounds of potential concern)," Walsh wrote, noting investigations were completed between 2019 and 2023, with results relayed to respective property owners along with recommended precautionary measures.

Walsh also noted off-site investigations have been complicated by the fact the course of Coldbrook Creek has changed over time. As a result, investigators have had to determine all areas affected along the

historic creek pathways, along with areas that are, or were previously prone to flooding over the past 100 years, he said.

The bottom line is there is no specific timetable for remediation of properties that may have been contaminated by toxins spread by Coldbrook Creek from the former industrial site, and DEC is asking for patience.

"While we acknowledge this process takes more time than desired, please be assured that the off-site contamination will be addressed," Walsh wrote. "The investigations must be as thorough and accurate as possible."

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Despite assurances, questions linger

While he is glad DEC responded to resident concerns about industrial contaminants seeping onto their properties, Hang considers it "an outrage" there is no deadline for cleanup to happen.

Hang believes there needs to be immediate action to protect public health.

"My letter to the governor requested that the properties contaminated by Coldbrook Creek be classified as a Class 1 Site — causing, or

presenting an imminent danger of causing, irreversible or irreparable damage to the public health or the environment," he said.

Hurley, likewise, would like to see more accountability, and action.

"We're not asking for much," he said. "We're asking for them to comply with the law. We understand Unisys accepted responsibility. It's time to do the cleanup. Get on with it. There's been lots of testing. We've seen the results of the testing. Now we want to see results because of the testing."

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