

MI Plant Source Of Six-Mile Groundwater Contamination

MANCELONA, Mich. (AP) — A six-mile-long plume of contaminated groundwater from a polluted northern Michigan factory site is threatening the Cedar River, one of two sources for the area's drinking water.

"I would have to say this is one of the largest contaminations we've ever seen," Janice Adams, a senior geologist with the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality, told The Detroit News for a Monday story.

The state has spent more than \$14 million battling the tainted groundwater generated at the Mancelona plant, which made auto parts in southern Antrim County. Dura Automotive Systems Inc., which operated there most recently, closed the factory in February.

The now-defunct Mount Clemens Industries Inc. operated the plant from 1947 to 1967, when workers used trichloroethylene, or TCE, to degrease the machinery. To dispose of the chemical, workers poured it on the ground or dumped it into seepage pits.

TCE is linked to several human health problems. Drinking or breathing in high levels of the chemical may cause nervous system effects, liver and lung damage, abnormal heartbeat, coma and possibly death, according to the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.

The giant plume of contaminated groundwater, at its thickest point, is about a mile and a quarter wide. It reaches northwest into Mancelona Township and adjacent Custer Township, to the Schuss Mountain-Shanty Creek Resorts area.

Along the contaminated stretch of water, state officials have transferred the use of well water to municipal water for 200 homes, 400 condominium units and the resorts. Now the municipal water supply is threatened because much of it comes from the Cedar River.

TCE has already been discovered in those waters at levels considered safe for people to drink but DEQ tests indicate that in 10 years or less, levels will rise to the point that the water becomes harmful.

Some homeowners forced to stop using their wells as a source for water have little animosity toward the plant and its former operators. For many people, the factory was the lifeblood of the community.

"I have no anger whatsoever over what happened there," said Herb Tipton, a 68-year-old member of the Mancelona Historical Society. "That plant fed my family."

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It gave me a job."

Tipton worked there for nearly four decades, starting in 1965.

"That plant didn't do anything different from any other plant (at the time)," Tipton said. "They didn't know any different."

State investigators agree, meaning there is no owner left to stick with the cleanup bill. There were no environmental laws in the 1950s and 1960s dictating the handling and disposal of products like TCE, and the parent companies that operated the plant no longer exist.

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