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Catawba industrial waste site a potential threat to water supply

BY JIE JENNY ZOU
 jzou@heraldonline.com May 17, 2014



CATAWBA — Thirty years after being declared a federal cleanup priority, a former Catawba waste site is at risk of contaminating local water.

Leonard Chemical Co. – a private hazardous waste facility that operated from 1966 to 1982 – was placed on the National Priorities List of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s Superfund program in 1984.

The company distilled inks, solvents and other waste from textile mills and industrial manufacturers, according to the EPA. Today, a chain-link fence surrounds an entrance to the 7-acre wooded site.

Officials say construction needed to contain groundwater contamination is slated to begin this fall and last a year. A public meeting will be held before construction to notify residents.

Even after construction ends in 2015, it will take an additional 30 years to fully contain threats to local water, officials estimate.

The 1980 Superfund program identifies the most hazardous sites in the United States and mandates polluters fund cleanup. In cases where polluters can’t be identified or lack money, cleanups are funded by corporate or general taxes.

EPA officials said timeframes vary based on sites’ contamination and geology. “It is going to take a while to clean up,” spokesperson Dawn Harris-Young said. “Regardless of whether it was put on the list 10 years ago, or put on in 1980.”

A review of documents show missed deadlines by the cleanup group, but no fines levied by EPA. Officials are unable to determine whether deadline extensions were granted due to “the length of time that has elapsed.”

“It wasn’t like it was put on the National Priorities List and nothing happened,” Harris-Young said. She said extensions may have been issued verbally or face-to-face, in which case, records don’t exist.

Harris-Young confirmed the agency hasn’t fined any of the companies to spur progress or penalize delays – despite guidelines that allow the agency to levy fines.

Environmental advocates such as John Suttles, a senior attorney with the Southern Environmental Law Center, said protracted cleanups such as the one in Catawba undermine the intentions of the

CATAWBA SUPERFUND SITE

Site: Leonard Chemical Co., Inc.

Location: Cureton Ferry Road (S.C. 697), Catawba.

Potentially responsible parties: Leonard Chemical Co., Inc; Lawrence K. Leonard; United Technologies Corp./BASF Corporation; Coleman Cable, Inc.; DMC, Inc.; General Electric Co.; K2, Inc.; Textron, Inc.; Rexham, Inc.; Springs Industries, Inc.; Stanley Works; State Printing; Ingersoll-Rand Co./Torrington Company, Inc.

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federal program.

“You’re talking more than a generation since they placed it on the Superfund list and they still haven’t resolved the groundwater contamination problem,” said Suttles, who is based in Chapel Hill, N.C. “This doesn’t seem like the speedy cleanup Congress envisioned.”

Suttles said the point of prioritizing sites is to avoid delays and minimize health threats. “These are the worst of the worst.”

A history of contamination

The owner of the dump, Lawrence K. Leonard, also operated the former Rock Hill Chemical Co. on Farlow Street and Cherry Road that was declared a federal Superfund priority in 1990.

Cleanup activities at the Rock Hill site were completed in 1996 and the site underwent a five-year-review in 2011. The timeline for the Catawba site off Cureton Ferry Road isn’t as clear.

According to a 2002 Herald article, Catawba cleanup activities were estimated to finish within 30 years, or 2032. Current projections place the end of cleanup closer to 2045.

Statewide there are currently 25 Superfund priorities. Besides Leonard Chemical, only three other sites in the state haven’t begun final construction.

The EPA lists the site as having contained direct threats to human health, but not to local water. However, underground cracks in rock can expose contaminants to private wells and surface water over time.

A recreational lake is located within a mile of the site and residences using private wells have been built nearby. Ferry Branch creek also runs through the site.

Leonard’s waste company operated until 1982, when a court order closed operations after he failed to secure a proper permit, according to the EPA. Leonard retains ownership of the property, but his company dissolved in 2008.

In 2004, Leonard, along with many of his former customers, claimed responsibility for the cleanup, which was last estimated to cost \$6.3 million in 2002.

Benne C. Hutson, a lawyer with McGuireWoods Consulting in Charlotte which is representing the cleanup group, declined to comment on the matter.

Potentially responsible parties include former textile operator Springs Industries Inc. and multi-national corporations such as General Electric Co.

Nearly 4,000 drums of chemicals were removed from the site in 1983 by the state Department of Health and Environmental Control. In 1987 the EPA officially took the lead on the cleanup.

Soil and groundwater samples found lead, and cancer-causing chemicals such as tetrachloroethene. Initial soil tests found one chemical, trichloroethane, at concentrations almost two thousand times the agency’s maximum limit.

Leonard, 84 and living in Charlotte, said he has cooperated fully with officials and is not an active player in the cleanup. “Back then there was no way of getting rid of any kind of waste, no legal way,” he said. “There was no laws about it, period.”

“I worked out there for a number of years, I never wore a pair of gloves or anything else,” Leonard said, who leased and operated the Rock Hill site before opening his own facility in Catawba. He called the facility a responsible alternative to illegal dumping.

In 2010, tons of soil were removed and a vacuum system targeting underground contamination was installed. Approval for final construction was granted in January with work to begin later this year, said EPA site manager Deborah Cox.

A delayed timeline and community outreach

A full investigation and a feasibility study are needed for the EPA to assess options prior to starting large-scale cleanup.

In December 1990, the cleanup group agreed to guidelines that required a feasibility draft within 400 business days – or less than two years. The first draft was submitted in 1996, but rejected by EPA in 1997 as “unacceptable.”

The draft failed to “prevent future residential use of the property” and exposed residents to “unacceptable carcinogenic and noncarcinogenic risks,” according to the EPA. A second study was completed in fall 2000, after the cleanup group hired another firm to revamp the study and update

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testing.

The EPA did not levy fines for the delays and officials noted it's unclear if the agency granted extensions. Officials attribute part of the delay to the feasibility study, but did not comment on whether the cleanup is considered to be on schedule.

Once a special barrier preventing chemical migration is constructed this year, the EPA estimates it will take another eight years to contain surface-water contamination and 30 years to contain underground contamination, Cox said.

Monitoring wells on nearby land owned by Resolute Forest Products keep track of water quality, but the last test on a residential well was conducted in 2001, along with the only public hearing.

Rosemary Cornwell, 73, remembers the 2001 public hearing where she requested officials test her well on Reservation Road, which is located within a mile of the site.

Cornwell said no one responded to her request. "What do I do? I don't know who to send my water to, I don't know who to contact," she said.

Neighbor Sara Meyer, 73, had a chemist test her well in 2001. The results came back clean and her well hasn't been retested. Meyer raised concerns about carcinogens during the public hearing and said she hopes to see the cleanup finished soon.

According to the 2012 American Community Survey by the Census bureau, at least a quarter of Catawba residents are estimated to live below the poverty line. Superfund policy requires planners to actively engage low-income or minority communities located near a site.

A public hearing will be scheduled sometime late this summer before the start of construction, officials said.

Jie Jenny Zou • 803-329-4062



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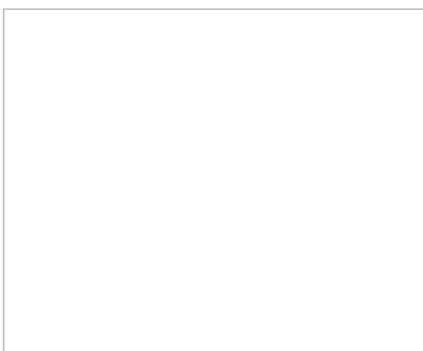


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