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Hinchey presses state DEC Emerson waits for ruling on soil, air testing plan

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ITHACA -- U.S. Rep. Maurice Hinchey is adding his voice to those calling for state officials to step up remedial efforts around the site of industrial solvent contamination in Ithaca.

"Emerson (Power Transmission) has been very cooperative. Emerson is doing the proper thing and attempting to be a good citizen here," Hinchey, D-22nd, said during a press conference on Turner Place in the city. "It is the Department of Environmental Conservation that is lagging ... in its responsibilities."

Earlier this month, Emerson submitted to the state a plan for indoor air and soil gas testing at 32 homes around Emerson's plant. That plan must be approved by the DEC.

"We haven't heard anything," said South Cayuga Street resident Joyce Muchan, adding that residents "want to know how contaminated we are and how toxic is the environment we are living in."

Other neighbors shared the same frustration, several adding that they would like to see the test area expanded to more homes.

Hinchey said he recently asked Emerson what they knew about the testing plan, and was told the company is waiting to hear back from the DEC.

"The DEC has been actively engaged with the company and the community on these and other matters for several weeks, and we're pleased the Congressman is now joining that discussion," said Mike Fraser, a DEC spokesman in Albany.

Fraser said he understood a decision on the testing plan could come "in the next two weeks or so."

Brendan Wyly and his family have lived on South Hill Terrace since 1997, and his mother-in-law will soon be living in a house on the same street.

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He would like their homes added to the test zone, and also suggested that investigations should focus on contamination sources other than the fire reservoir.

"Really, what would give me some reassurance would be if Emerson would work with some independent researcher, such as an environmental engineer in academia," Wyly said.

Hinchey said he learned of the problem in May, after reading newspaper articles. He contacted the DEC seeking information, but waited 12 weeks for a response. The Congressman said he was required to fill out a Freedom of Information request for relevant documents.

Before 1983, the organic solvent trichloroethylene, or TCE, was used to degrease chains at the former Morse Chain plant. Emerson bought the factory in 1983, and TCE was not used under its ownership.

In 1987, TCE was found to have leaked into soil and groundwater from an underground fire water reservoir on the property. In the 1990s, Emerson, with DEC's approval, set up a "pump-and-treat" remedial system in response to the pollution.

This May, Walter Hang, of Ithaca-based Toxics Targeting, called on the DEC and Emerson to revamp the existing remediation process after a consultants' study done for Emerson showed high levels of TCE persisted in some areas as recently as December 2003.

In June, the DEC approved a plan to do vadose zone, or soil gas, testing at nine sites in neighborhoods around the plant. The results, released in July, detected TCE and related compounds. That's when the DEC instructed Emerson to make a proposal for testing at private homes.

Hinchey, like Hang, also believes the site's classification should be upgraded from Class 4 -- meaning the site is closed and requires only continued management -- to Class 2, which indicates a significant threat to public health.

"This site does not fit the definition of a Class 4 site," Hinchey wrote to DEC Commissioner Erin Crotty. "Clearly it is not properly closed and it requires more than continued management."

He also called on Crotty to increase the number of homes tested.

"While threats to public health are of primary importance, property owners also deserve assurances that their homes are not located in a toxic zone," he wrote.

DEC's Fraser said the agency "will take more aggressive steps for remedial investigation and clean-up, including the possibility of re-classifying the site under the Superfund law."

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