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Local News - Wednesday, February 23, 2005

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DEC alters posture on Emerson

JENNIE DALEY
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ITHACA -- The Department of Environmental Conservation has reclassified the Emerson Power Transmission factory cleanup site as a 'significant threat to the environment.'

The DEC changed the site from a Class 4 -- a site that has been properly closed but requires continued maintenance and/or monitoring -- to a Class 2.

The announcement was buried in the notification for a public meeting on the factory.

The new designations signifies that "hazardous waste constitutes a significant threat to the environment," according to the DEC Web site.

Timothy Weber, one of the managers of a Internet listserv for concerned residents living near the site, said the announcement wasn't a surprise to him but he found the means of announcing it less than forthcoming.

"We want the appearance of progress as much as progress," Weber said. "We're part of the process and we need to know what's happening."

Many involved with the investigation and remediation at Emerson don't expect reclassification to change much of what is happening there. What the new status does provide is a financial safety net for the project. Should Emerson in the future decide it no longer wants to fund the cleanup, the state would now be able to access its Superfund money to clean up the site.

"It's certainly more common to go from a (Class) 2 to a (Class) 4," said Mary Jane Peachey, a regional engineer in the DEC's Syracuse office. "Typically it's new information that makes the classification from (Class) 4 to (Class) 2 happen."

In Emerson's case, the first new information to affect the site was a consultant's findings last spring during its monitoring of trichloroethylene, or TCE, at the plant.

TCE was a solvent used by the former Morse Chain plant to degrease chains made at the factory. The chemical can cause nerve damage, dizziness and headaches if inhaled in large quantities. Consultants found levels as high as 28,000 parts per billion in December of 2003. The state cleanup standard is anything above five parts per billion.

Since then, 49 homes have been tested to see if TCE vapors have infiltrated homes downhill from the plant and more than one has received a vapor mitigation system from Emerson due to TCE levels.

"I think reclassification is a good idea so we'll get a full investigation of what went on at the plant in terms of pollution," said Peter Glick, who lives on Park Street, just outside the zone where homes are being tested.

David Baldrige, spokesperson for Emerson, said that Emerson doesn't expect any changes in its commitment to the site with reclassification. He added that the company plans to continue cooperating with the DEC on any investigation or remediation that is needed.

The IBM plant in Endicott is one of the few other sites in the state where such a reclassification, from a Class 4 to a Class 2, has occurred.

Weber and others anticipate a public meeting and availability session scheduled for March 3 will offer an opportunity to understand the impacts of reclassification and the test results from homes where air and soil samples were taken.

The availability session will be from 4-6 p.m. in the Tompkins County Human Services Building at 320 W. State St. The public meeting will follow at 7 in the same location.

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