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Morse Chain site to be reclassified

JENNIE DALEY

Journal Staff

ITHACA -- Reclassification of the Emerson Power Transmission site on South Hill is imminent, according to state officials, but the impact of the change on investigations into pollution sources at the plant is expected to be minimal.

The site is now listed as Class 4 on the state's Inactive Hazardous Waste Disposal Site list, signifying the site was properly closed after officials addressed infiltration of trichloroethylene, or TCE, in soil and groundwater. TCE, a solvent used to degrease chains at the plant up until 1983, can be hazardous to human health if its fumes are inhaled in large quantities.

Proceedings under way at the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation will change the site's listing to Class 2: "a significant threat to public health or environment -- action required."

Mary Jane Peachey, a regional engineer in the DEC's Syracuse office, said she hoped to see a final document by the end of the month.

Residents living downhill from the plant were optimistic that reclassification would trigger more extensive action by the DEC and Emerson.

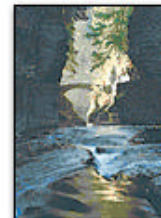
"I thought reclassification was going to mean that it was a clear and present danger to neighbors and trigger additional work around the facility and other testing and monitoring," said Rick Grossman, who lives on Park

Why it matters

- **IMPACT:** Reclassification of the former Morse Chain Plant from Class 4 to Class 2 allows New York State to utilize its Superfund money to continue addressing contamination at the former Morse Chain plant should Emerson Power Transmission decide at a later date it no longer wants to fund the investigation and/or cleanup.
- **WHAT'S NEXT:** State Department of Environmental Conservation officials expect reclassification to be finalized by the end of the month. In the meantime the second round of testing of air in at least 49 homes will continue.
- For more information, visit www.dec.state.ny.us

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Street just outside of the current testing area. "My understanding now is that all Class 2 does is, if Emerson decides not to play ball, everybody doesn't have to pack up and go home."

When listed as Class 2, the DEC will gain legal rights to tap into New York State's Superfund money to continue investigations and remediations, should Emerson decide in the future that they no longer want to fund the cleanup.

"Things will not be different," Peachey said of investigations. "We have been working with Emerson to evaluate on-site and off-site contamination and that will continue."

David Baldrige, a spokesperson for Emerson, expressed a similar sentiment.

"Emerson does not anticipate any changes to its commitment despite any changes in classification," he said.

This is little comfort for those who were hoping reclassification would trigger more action.

Karen Chimento, who owns a rental property on West Spencer Street, sees the impending reclassification as too little, too late.

"I thought this was supposed to (be) dealt with years ago. I don't understand why it's taking this long," she said.

The first tests indicating there may be contamination issues associated with the plant were in 1987 when TCE, residue from a decades-old leak in a fire water reservoir was discovered. In 1991, indoor air samples showed TCE in residences and, after a ground water extraction system was installed, hazardous soils removed and the reservoir lined with plastic, the site was listed as closed in 1995.

The issue arose again last spring when the city looked at excavating along West Spencer Street for a road construction project and residents expressed concern over disturbing potentially contaminated soil.

Since then, at least 49 homes downhill from Emerson have been tested for indoor air contamination, and more than one home has received a vapor mitigation system to reduce levels of TCE.

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