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Records detail decades of pollution Morse plant's oil disposal methods criticized in 1960s health reports

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ITHACA - Oil pollution problems around the former Morse Chain plant appear to have caught the attention of local officials more than 40 years ago, according to documents on file at the Tompkins County Health Department.

But according to a local environmental watchdog who recently reviewed the files, lingering effects from oil spills may have been overlooked when other contamination issues were being addressed.

Records show that in the 1960s, the factory generated 50 tons of scrap metal per day. The scrap also included 300 gallons of cutting, lubrication and quench oils. Oil from that scrap reportedly leaked onto the ground over a lengthy period, said Walter Hang, president of Ithaca-based Toxics Targeting, a private-sector environmental consulting agency.

"Those persistent oil releases could still pose a hazard to the environment or public health," Hang said.

Emerson Power Transmission, the plant's present owner, has been working with the State Department of Environmental Conservation to clean up a different problem - the remnants of decades-old solvent spills around the factory, discovered in 1987.

Prior to 1983, Morse used trichloroethylene, or TCE, to strip grease from chains and other metal parts. Emerson uncovered the problem in 1987 and reported it to the DEC. Following several years of investigation, the DEC issued a formal clean-up plan, called a record of decision, in 1994.

Hang's is concerned because the 1994 plan "failed to require ... oil releases that polluted a large area to be investigated and cleaned up."

"Our understanding of the plant history is that there were a number of communications between state and local officials and the prior owners of the plant - before Emerson acquired the property in 1983 - concerning the management of oil at the plant," said Emerson spokesman Dave Baldrige.



"Beyond that, I'd have to refer you back to the state for any further information," Baldrige added.

DEC Region 7 Engineer Mary Jane Peachey said she wasn't personally aware of the old oil spills and hadn't seen the documents, although she wouldn't rule out the possibility that the DEC might have been informed about the oil earlier.

"It's possible that there was sampling done, and that sampling showed that there wasn't a need to do more clean-up for these matters," Peachey said.

She plans to seek copies of the documents Hang obtained from the county. "If we discover things that indicate a clean-up needs to be done there, we will follow up on it," Peachey said.

"I am trusting that the DEC will investigate and remediate this problem, but the scale of this dumping will be very daunting, said Hang.

Indeed, it took county and state agencies, working with Morse, about a decade to bring the oil problem under apparent control.

Problems noted in 1962

In 1962, county health officials expressed concern that waste oil from the plant was draining into storm sewers and polluting the surrounding areas, including Six Mile Creek.

Letters from the county Health Department to Morse show an investigation that year was started in response to complaints "of a milky waste which was issuing from a South Cayuga Street storm sewer into Six Mile Creek just down stream from the Cayuga Street bridge." That waste turned out to be an emulsion of water and oil.

Investigation at the plant found scrap metal shavings, chips and stampings, along with cutting oil, were temporarily stored in bins prior to being loaded onto railroad cars or other transportation away from the site. Leaking oil from the scrap metal dock area flowed into the sewer, largely unchecked.

In 1963, Morse installed a filtration system at the dock, designed to separate oil from stormwater. Yet pollution problems continued.

Documents from 1966 indicate oil was found to be seeping through the ledge rock and collecting in the gutters along Spencer and Wood streets.

Town of Ithaca resident David Auble was a young boy growing up on Green Street in those years. On occasion, he and his friends used to enjoy escaping the city by playing in the wooded area at the base of the escarpment below the factory.

"We'd go shoot bows and arrows," Auble said, recalling the foliage and undergrowth there as "kind of stunted" and discolored. He said toy arrows retrieved from the area sometimes had an oily residue on them.

He also remembered seeing oily fluid in the gutters nearby.

"Occasionally, we would see that, but we all kind of thought it was runoff from the streets," Auble said. "Thinking back on it, it was more than you'd see from

runoff."

Clean-up efforts made

Records show Morse made several remediation proposals, including laying a concrete pad to channel oil into the tank, and use of oil-tight containers to store scrap - both of which appear to have eventually been done. In June 1966, Morse also queried state health officials about the possibility of discharging oil into a deep well on the property. By October 1967, state and county health officials had effectively quashed that plan, fearing that it could lead to groundwater contamination.

By July 1968, county officials chided Morse for delays in implementing various agreed-upon proposals, and warned that they were soon to refer the case to the state Department of Health's Pure Waters Division.

By the end of the month, Morse had consulted with the county about improvements. One part of the plan included transporting metal waste to the Wallace Steel Company on West Clinton Street (now Cecil A. Malone Drive). There, the oil was drained into a waste tank, and the metal placed in a scrap dump. A Syracuse firm periodically pumped out the oil.

But this did not wholly solve the leakage around Morse's loading dock, and Pure waters did get involved in the case.

Various improvements at the loading dock and installation of a new collecting sump were among the remedies applied in the intervening year. A Pure Waters sanitary engineer noted in August 1969, that his agency was "pleased to see the improvements in stopping the oil and waste water from running into the storm sewer at South Cayuga Street," advising Morse to maintain "good housekeeping practices," with permanent changes to be completed by a December 1970 deadline.

In March 1972, Pure Waters praised Morse for its efforts to correct "the oil waste problem at the scrap metal loading area," noting it had been done "by employing closed scrap washing units; consequently, the scrap metal pieces are now free of oil and are being transferred into the railroad cars by means of a conveyor belt."

Records show episodic oil seepage continued, however.

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