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Toxic waste site fell through cracks

By Virginia Annable vannable@newstopicnews.com Aug 27, 2017



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The Caldwell Systems Inc. incinerator and landfill site sits at the end of Drag Strip Road, off Mount Herman Road.

Jason Bowman remembers when the groundwater around his home started smelling bad.

"We wouldn't even let the horses drink it. ... We had to run city water for them," he said.

Bowman and his parents live just down the road from the old Caldwell Systems Inc. site, where the company ran a hazardous waste incinerator and landfill, and have for 37 years, long before the site was shut down in the early 1990s.

Now, nearly 25 years since the company's demise, a new study on the toxic waste disposal site is about to start -- several years after it was supposed to -- but Bowman and his family have low hopes of the groundwater study or anything stemming from it helping anything, and they aren't alone.

Cotton Johnson, who actively opposed the incinerator for years, said he doesn't expect much of those in charge.

"Every time they promise something it doesn't always happen, and it's sad," Johnson said.

But who exactly was in charge was unclear for years, even to the government, which is the reason the new corrective measures study that the Caldwell County Board of Commissioners voted for last week didn't get done seven years ago, as it was supposed to have been. The study is meant to determine what areas of groundwater are contaminated, what the contaminants are, whether they need to be cleaned up and, if so, how to clean them.

Mary Siedlecki, a new site project manager with the North Carolina Department of Environmental Quality, said neither her agency nor the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency realized the other hadn't initiated the study.

In 1991, the EPA shut the site down, and by 1997 a federal court case brought by the EPA ended with Caldwell County, which leased the land to CSI, and 42 companies that disposed of waste through CSI agreeing to pay for clean-up of the site.

The settlement, called a federal consent decree, required a soil work plan, groundwater work plan and a corrective measures study to be completed in phases, one after the other. The soil work plan, which involved studies and cleanup, was completed, as was the groundwater work plan, called a Resource Conservation and Recovery Act Facility Investigation, or RFI for short.

But the corrective measures study, which was supposed to start within 60 days after the EPA approved the RFI, slipped through the cracks. The EPA approved the RFI in 2010, but word never made it to Caldwell County.

"The letter that would have triggered the next phase didn't go," Siedlecki said.

So this past June, the DEQ sent a letter to the Caldwell County Board of Commissioners asking for the study, Siedlecki said, and they were a little blindsided.

"Caldwell County was unprepared and asked for an extension," Siedlecki said.

None of the current county commissioners were in office when the RFI work was being done. Only Commissioner Mike Labrose comes close -- he was elected in November 2010.

Bowman said he wasn't surprised no one realized that a step had been missed.

"They don't care," he said. "I know the water is still like that, and it bothers me."

Last week the commissioners voted to hire an environmental consulting firm to do the study, which will cost around \$20,000 and must be complete for the DEQ by Dec. 31.

Johnson said he doesn't think it's enough.

"I don't think \$20,000 is going to clean it up," he said.

But Siedlecki said the remaining contamination has broken down naturally and gotten better. The environmental consultant's proposal to the commissioners suggested the best plan may be to leave the site as it is now, only monitoring the remaining contamination.

This has basically been what has been happening for the past 17 years, Siedlecki said. There are annual groundwater and soil tests to monitor contamination, the latest done in November 2016, and they have shown no major problems. But Siedlecki wants the corrective measures study to officially determine no other steps are needed.

"We want to cross our Ts and dot our I's," she said. "I'm really thorough, and I sit and I think about everything."

Siedlecki said if a problem is found, it would be fixable.

"It's never too late," she said.

But Johnson is doubtful and wonders whether contamination has spread.

"It's disgusting to think it was supposed to be done years ago," he said.

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