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Citizens call for Sanco water probe

By Christopher Brooks
 BETHELEHEM--Alarmed by rapidly growing levels of hazardous substances found in water tests at the Consumat Sanco landfill in Bethlehem, two townspeople are calling for public pressure to push state environmental regulators and the EPA to investigate the problem.

Ted Wilkinson and Sarah Mike cite a worrisome trend shown in quarterly water testing reports submitted over the past six years by Eastern Analytical, Inc. of Concord--a testing firm retained by the landfill's owners to monitor landfill groundwater quality in accordance with state and federal regulations.

Those reports, which are public information and on file in the selectmen's office, indicate that levels of known carcinogens well in excess of federal safety standards have been found for months, and in some cases as early as 1984, in water taken from the 100 series of wells drilled in the oldest section of the landfill.

In its Sept. 9 report on August testing, Eastern Analytical found that levels of such volatile organic compounds, or VOCs, as acetone, toluene and methyl ethyl ketone have doubled and tripled in most 100 series wells since April.

Those results are cause for concern, say Wilkinson and Mike, because just 100 yards below well 102B, perhaps the worst toxic offender, is the known seep which oozes down to the Ammonoosuc River. Wilkinson describes the seep as "a mass of fluorescent spongy orange oozing down the hill with an oily sheen of water on top of it."

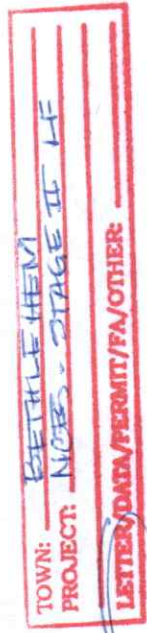
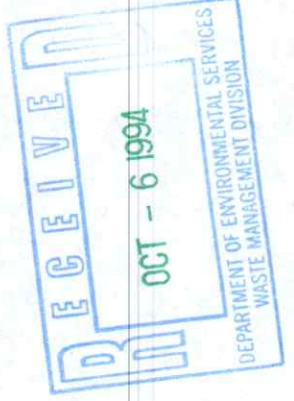
"My concern is that what's showing up in the 100 wells will soon show up in the seep," he says. Wilkinson, who has taught science at the White Mountain School and says he studied organic chemistry and molecular biology with Nobel laureate George Wald at Harvard, says chlorinated hydrocarbons like methylene chloride and dichloroethene, which have been found in the Consumat

Sanco testing, "never leave the human system. Like DDT, they accumulate in fat, in bone marrow, in mother's milk."

According to the reports, the highest concentrations of VOCs are found in the unlined and single-lined sections of the landfill, which the state Department of Environmental Services (DES) declared clean in December 1993 after allowing the landfill owners to excavate 5.3 acres of refuse and move it to an adjacent double-lined section. The state permit allows the owners to re-grade the section and reuse it after installing a double-liner leachate collection system.

More alarming in the long run, say Wilkinson and Mike, is the fact that August testing shows, for the first time, the presence of methylene chloride - which Wilkinson calls "a dioxin precursor, cousin to DDT" - in well 406U. That well is part of the 400 series located between the lower original section and the upper double-lined section which comprises the

(Continued on Fifteen)



Dr. O'Brien
 R. Reed
 P. Sprague
 A. Renner
 J. Regan
 J. Berg



EXAMINING GRAPHS—Ted Wilkinson, left, Nick Mike and Sarah Mike examine a graph showing hazardous substance levels in water samples from the Consumat Saucio landfill.
(Photo by Christopher Brooks)

Landfill

(Continued from One)

bulk of the landfill facility.

"This particular well," Wilkinson maintains, "is located outside the double-lined area specifically to measure failure. Effluent can't run uphill, so what we're seeing is the fact that the system's been breached," he says, citing an August 1990 state report which identified leaks in both the double-lined section and the ash storage cell. The report said the owners had promised to locate and repair the leaks.

Approval is now pending in Concord for New England Waste Systems, the new owners of the landfill, to add a 200,000 cubic yard overlay of waste on top of the leaking double-liner. That overlay would increase hydraulic pressure on a system which has already failed and whose pipe, liner and design are already dated by industry standards, Wilkinson warns.

Wilkinson and other Bethlehem residents have written letters to newspapers, and Sarah Mike has sent information to the EPA's Boston office asking that agency to look over the data. Within the state, the public comment stage for Phase II of the landfill is over, but Wilkinson says the public can write DES to demand a public hearing in Littleton on whether to reopen the permitting process.

"There's nothing citizens can do besides ask questions at this point," he said during an interview Friday. "My hope is that the Stage II expansion in its entirety - ground and overlay - will be reconsidered. As it's presently envisioned, this will make a bad situation worse."

During the interview, both Wilkinson and Mike took pains to distance themselves from any advocacy position concerning the landfill, which has polarized many Bethlehem residents in recent years. Wilkinson chairs the town's zoning board and Mike its planning board, and both insist they have never been involved with AWARE, the activist group most associated with opposition to the landfill. "We're just private citizens who think that people need to know the facts," Mike maintains.

That explanation fails to satisfy selectman John Wedick, who, during the course of a telephone interview, warned a reporter repeatedly that "You could get led down the garden path" by listening to Wilkinson and Mike. He said the board and the activists "are in the same book, but we may be on a different page."

Wedick said that the selectmen are concerned about the August test results and have asked DES to examine and assess the findings, determine whether action is required, and recommend any appropriate action. At the same time, he dismissed Wilkinson and Mike as "amateurs" and offered his own interpretation of the test results.

"VOCs have gone up substantially in wells which monitor the old landfill," Wedick said. "Unfortunately, that's the predictable result of an unlined landfill, which is why unlined landfills are no longer legal."

"What's this all about? Apparently, according to the groundwater engineers, this is a flushing process. What's happening now is you've got water running through. The issue is how long can we expect this to go on. If they move to build Phase II, you're going to stop water from going through and therefore the tests will change again."

"My understanding is that the engineers see this as predictable. In fact, they predicted it," Wedick said. "We've based our response to the state on legal opinion and we see no reason to change that

opinion. We're also still talking with the people who operate the landfill, and we've done much more work on this than most people know. There is absolutely no reason to panic."

Wedick said the selectmen have no plans to hold a public hearing to discuss DES findings, but that documents continue to be available in the town office under the Right To Know law.

Monday calls to a number of top officials at the Bureau of Waste Management requesting comment on Wilkinson's charges were not returned.