

Spreading toxic plume of water emanating from historic NY defense plant sparks concerns

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BETHPAGE, N.Y. — A decades-long toxic cleanup around the former aerospace plant that helped land a man on the moon is getting renewed scrutiny after groundwater tests showed a potential carcinogen spreading deeper and toward nearby Long Island communities.

Officials revealed this month that the 4.5 mile by 3.5 mile plume of underground contamination in Bethpage is moving deeper than ever. High concentrations of the industrial solvent trichloroethylene, or TCE, were found more than 60 stories below ground.

Readings show the plume is moving further south toward untainted public wells, officials said.

"Unless they figure a way to reach it, locate it and extract it, you're looking at a much longer range of a high contamination area that they will have to contend with," warned Sarah Meyland, associate professor of environmental technology at New York Institute of Technology.

The contamination is emanating from a 600-acre property that was once home to Grumman Aerospace Corp., the U.S. Navy and other associated defense industries. Grumman built an armada of aircraft used during the Cold War, as well as the lunar module that landed astronauts on the moon.

Northrop-Grumman ceased manufacturing operations at the site in 1996 but maintains facilities on the property. The company says it has spent \$120 million and the Navy another \$80 million on plume-remediation efforts, including water filtration plants, wells and other facilities to monitor the contamination. Both say they are committed to addressing future concerns.

At a public meeting earlier this month, officials confirmed that high levels of TCE were found in groundwater 620 feet below ground.

"Most of the high concentrations have not been that deep," Rich Humann, president and CEO of H2M, an engineering firm representing the Bethpage Water District and several neighboring water suppliers. "The deeper it gets shows that it's moving and that might be more difficult to address. It was a very high concentration."

Officials at the Massapequa Water District — south of Bethpage — said readings indicate the contamination is imperiling clean wells in that community. "We're sitting here watching this plume move toward us," said Stan Carey, the water district superintendent. "TCE is the primary compound and over time the readings seem to be increasing."



Lora Fly, remedial project manager for the Naval Facilities Engineering Command, the entity overseeing the Navy cleanup, said investigators will attempt to determine whether the higher levels are the result of new contamination, or spreading from the pre-existing plume.

There has been no indication that any of the treated water from the site poses any health risk to the public and surrounding communities; the dispute centers primarily on methods for treating the plume. About 250,000 residents live in the area in southeastern Nassau County, about 45 minutes east of New York City.

Local environmentalists and elected officials have complained for years that the state Department of Environmental Conservation, which oversees the cleanup, has allowed Northrop-Grumman and the Navy to employ so-called wellhead treatment, where the tainted water is decontaminated in water treatment plants before it is sent to customers.

Others prefer what they say is a more aggressive hydraulic alternative, in which wells are drilled at the edges of the plume to not only decontaminate the water, but prevent it from migrating further.

Local elected officials and water company experts held a news conference Tuesday to call for Gov. Andrew Cuomo to sign legislation that would require the state Department of Environmental Conservation to consider the more expensive alternative. Assemblyman Joseph Saladino, who sponsored the bill, estimates that alternative could end up costing as much as \$500 million.

A spokesman for the governor said Monday he has yet to receive the legislation for consideration. The governor has until the end of the year to act on it.

Adrienne Esposito, executive director of the Citizens Campaign for the Environment, said at Tuesday's press conference that passage of the legislation would "guarantee active interception of these toxic plumes before they get to a number of public water supply wells."

Meanwhile, residents have a spectrum of health and economic concerns.

"It's nerve-wracking," said Richard Armbruster, 53, a lifelong resident of Bethpage who said his family only drinks bottled water.

"A lot of people are nervous, but I think it's about property values. Our assets are in the house you own. You try to take care of it. It's a nice neighborhood but you don't know what's going on underneath you."