

Dow Chemical spill in St. Clair River found polluting some drinking water

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A dry-cleaning chemical that spilled from a Dow Chemical Canada Inc. plant at Sarnia, Ont., two weeks ago has contaminated the drinking water of some areas near the St. Clair River, an investigation by the Ontario Environment Ministry has found.

Initial water samples taken from Wallaceburg and Walpole Island showed seven parts per billion of perchloroethylene, said Cal Haniff, a

senior environmental officer at the ministry's Sarnia district. The chemical has been linked in the past to kidney and liver damage.

However, subsequent tests at Wallaceburg and Walpole Island showed two parts per billion of the chemical, said David Oved, an official in Environment Minister James Bradley's office.

The World Health Organization's standard for unsafe levels of the chemical is 10 parts per billion, Mr. Haniff said. The Ontario Government "doesn't have criteria set for this chemical, so it refers to the World Health Organization's (standards)."

Mr. Haniff said the water is safe to drink but tests will continue "until concentrations get down to non-detectable limits."

"The levels appear to be going down, but we're going to keep testing for a while," Mr. Oved said. "The problem is dissipating. The chemical seems to stick together in globs, so divers can literally vacuum it from the water."

A Dow Chemical spokesman said the company sent a crew to clean up the spill, which was caused by a leaky valve, as soon as it was discovered two weeks ago. When the Government found additional traces of the chemical last Wednesday and Thursday, the company sent out the cleanup crew again.

The ministry was alerted to the spill by members of the Greenpeace environmental group who were told about it by Dow Chemical workers during the group's pollution protest tour of the Great Lakes.

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In the Reader's Opinion

Dow's attitude 'deplorable'

Sir:
This is a somewhat delayed response to a major environmental crisis: the Dow spill of perchloroethylene. My response is late because my knowledge of the problem came after the most serious part of the crisis was over.

I work on Walpole Island and live in Wallaceburg. In both locations, drinking water comes from the St. Clair River. Between Aug. 13 and Aug. 17, there was a major chemical spill from Dow Chemical. It was not until Aug. 28, that Walpole Island Administration was officially notified of the crisis. I feel the casual attitude taken by Dow in this matter is deplorable. I strongly believe that all communities in danger of being effected by the spill should have been notified immediately at the onset of the crisis.

I find it difficult to believe that with the technology of the chemical industry, this leak went undetected for four days and further, that there are great discrepancies about the actual amount of perchloroethylene released into the river. I feel we have a right to be guaranteed that all traces of the spill have been recovered and that our drinking water is 100 per cent safe. In dealing with such hazardous chemicals, companies such as Dow should take the most sophisticated precautions known to the chemical industry to safeguard the environment.

I supervise the day care centre on Walpole Island. We have a very strict nutrition policy which excludes many foods due to the questionable nature of some of their additives and preservatives. We are so careful to monitor the foods these children eat, yet we unknowingly gave them water contaminated with perchloroethylene, a known carcinogen.

The future implications of this spill are frightening. We won't truly experience the full repercussions in the near future, but possibly a few years down the road. For the Dow executives who have down-played the seriousness of this situation, I wonder if you can totally guarantee the small children in my centre that they will suffer no ill effects of this event in the future. I wonder if you can guarantee expectant mothers who unknowingly drank this water for days during the most critical time of the crisis that their unborn children will not be effected.

My major concern with this crisis is that a mass alert to the communities who were ultimately effected was not made. I sincerely hope that this incident prompts the chemical industries to review their operations and develop plans of action to prevent a future occurrence.

In closing, I would like to express thanks to the Greenpeace Organization for its support and diligence in trying to secure a safe and healthy world for our next generation.

"A child does not question the wrongs of grown-ups, he suffers them" — Chiel Dan George.

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Dow charged with pollution

Chemical plant Dow Chemical of Canada Inc. has been charged with six counts under Ontario's environmental legislation following a spill of dry cleaning fluid from its Sarnia plant into the St. Clair River.

Two of the charges relate to "harm and material discomfort" suffered by ministry of environment divers who took samples from the river after the incident last month.

The other charges against Dow are for discharging perchloroethylene into the river on four days during the week of Aug. 12.

Spilled chemical in drinking water

SARNIA, Ont. (CP) — A cancer-causing chemical spilled into the St. Clair River two weeks ago by a faulty valve at a Dow Chemical Canada Inc. plant has been found in samples taken from drinking water intake pipes at Walpole Island and Wallaceburg.

Cal Haniff of the Ontario environment ministry said the samples contain 7 parts per billion of perchloroethylene. The World Health Organization considers levels below 10 parts per billion acceptable, he said.

The water is considered safe to drink, Haniff said. But if the concentration holds steady, the ministry will need to discuss the situation with "medical people."