



The Intelligencer

State ID's Bergey's tire shop for Rockhill drinking water contamination

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The PADEP announced Tuesday they had identified at Bergey's Tires property as a source of chemical contamination in Rockhill area wells. Residents continue to express frustration at the pace of the investigation.

The Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection has identified Bergey's Tires as a "potentially responsible party" for drinking water contamination in East and West Rockhill townships, according to a statement released by the DEP on Tuesday.

The investigation dates back nearly three years, after the DEP in 2016 discovered per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS) in a pair of drinking water wells that were owned by the North Penn Water Authority and served several hundred nearby residents. The wells were then shut down. Subsequent testing of more than 150 private drinking water wells in the area identified 14 that contained PFAS above a safety limit recommended by the Environmental Protection Agency.

Bottled water was provided to those homes and the DEP is now in the process of installing water filters. The response has angered many of the homeowners, who requested connection to nearby public water systems instead.

PFAS contamination is most well-known in communities near former military bases in Bucks and Montgomery County, where widespread use of firefighting foams led to the contamination of drinking water for upwards of 100,000 residents. The chemicals have been linked by some studies to a variety of health effects, causing concern about the implications of exposure and resulting in a variety of efforts by lawmakers and scientists.

But the Rockhill-area contamination, centering along the township line near Bethlehem Pike, is separate. In July 2018, this news organization ran an investigation revealing that during a 1986 tire fire at a Bergey's property nearby, fire crews from the former Naval Air Station-Joint Reserve Base Willow Grove and Naval Air Warfare Center Warminster arrived and attempted to use foams to douse the large inferno. The foams, which were ineffective for the fire, from that era were known to contain PFAS.

The report also noted that the DEP had contacted Bergey's as part of its investigation.

Tuesday's announcement, which comes more than a year after the investigative report, marks the first time DEP has publicly stated it believes Bergey's holds some level of responsibility. A prepared statement says the agency installed monitoring wells and took numerous water and soil samples through 2019 as part of its investigation. Much of it was focused on the Bergey's property at 1419 Bethlehem Pike.

"The investigation confirmed the presence of PFOS and PFOA contamination at this address, which historical records indicate was the location of a tire fire in 1986 that was extinguished with firefighting foam," the release stated. "DEP has since identified this location as a source of PFAS and its property owner... as a potentially responsible person under the Pennsylvania Hazardous Sites Cleanup Act."

The exact significance of DEP's Tuesday announcement is unclear. The department says it will work and "attempt to engage" Bergey's on additional sampling and "options for remediation," which means cleanup. A separate notice to residents says they can expect to see the DEP continuing to take samples.

A DEP notice sent directly to Bergey's says the DEP is not requiring any specific action at this time, but that Bergey's "could be responsible for any environmental investigations or cleanup actions necessary at this site."

An attorney who has spoken on behalf of Bergey's did not immediately respond to a request for comment sent Tuesday.

Environmental investigations by regulators and the identification of "potentially responsible parties" can sometimes result in one responsible entity suing others it perceives as also responsible in an attempt to share some financial burden. To date there's been no indication of any such dynamics underway by Bergey's.

David Budnick, chief financial officer at the company, said last year that the company didn't believe it was responsible.

"To our knowledge, we have done nothing to cause the contamination, therefore we do not believe we are responsible for the related costs," Budnick said.

The initial reaction Tuesday from resident Angela Goodwin, one of the impacted property owners whose backyard directly abuts the area of the fire at Bergey's, was anger at all parties involved. Goodwin said she was frustrated with the pace of the investigation.

"So now we're determining it's coming from Bergey's, but we're not making them do anything," Goodwin said, incredulously. "I'm just done."

Goodwin said in addition to her drinking water contamination, the DEP recently sampled soil in her yard and found it too contained PFAS. But she said she was told by the DEP that there are currently no soil standards for PFAS, leaving her in a place where she has knowledge but no course of action.

"We're dealing with it right in our own backyard," Goodwin said, adding she was frustrated to the point of considering legal action.

In a prepared statement, DEP southeast regional director Pat Patterson appeared to make an effort to smooth over frustration from the community.

"We understand these investigations can take longer than expected and that the process can be frustrating to those living with impacts," Patterson said. "We appreciate the community's assistance in this investigation and their ongoing patience and cooperation. While this is an important step, we still have much work to do."

It appears Patterson's entreaty did not have the desired effect, at least with Goodwin. Following the DEP's announcement, Goodwin emailed a DEP field employee and copied a reporter, her ongoing anger palpable.

"You move like snails and do not care about the people affected," Goodwin wrote.