

New Federal Study Proves Army Dumping Poisoned Earleville Wells; Army Wants to Resume Dumping in Cecil County

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By [Nancy Schwerzler](#)

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A new comprehensive study by a federal agency proves what Earleville residents have known for decades: the US Army Corps of Engineers' dumping of shipping channel dredge spoil in Cecil County has poisoned many homes' drinking water wells—including hugely elevated levels of arsenic, heavy metals, and sulfates. But the Corps wants to resume dumping in the area, after an unspecified 'remediation' effort at the Pearce's Creek dump site.

The report by the US Geological Survey (USGS) was published online on 1/17/13 [SEE detailed, scientific jargon and charts-laden report here: http://pubs.usgs.gov/sir/2012/5263/sir12_5263.pdf] But its conclusions have been known in the community in broad outlines for several months. The Corps held a briefing for some "elected officials" in Elkton late last year but community activists were barred from the meeting, sources said, and several county elected officials said they were not advised in advance of the meeting.

Separately, Cecil County Executive Tari Moore told Cecil Times that shortly after she assumed her office in December, representatives of the Corps and the Port of Baltimore met with her personally in a "get-acquainted" session and spoke in general terms about the then-pending report. "They said they were going to do some remediation," she said, and they spoke about putting some sort of a "liner" beneath the huge piles of dredge spoil currently dumped on the site, which is located at the end of Pond Neck Road.

Moore said she and other county officials would meet with Corps representatives on 2/4/13 to discuss the report and the Corps' plans to deal with the contamination of local residents' drinking water supply. "I know there's a lot of concern down there" and "frustration" among local residents about the long history of inaction about those concerns, Moore said. She said she believed that state environmental officials should play a role in determining the future of any resumption of dumping at the site, which is adjacent to the Elk River at the entrance to the upper Chesapeake Bay.

Newly elected County Councilor Alan McCarthy (R-1), whose district includes the Earleville area, said he has just received the new report and is still reviewing it but voiced concerns about any further dumping in the area. "This is a big mess," he said. "There needs to be action taken to correct the problems people in the community are facing, and they should not keep dumping in this area."

In a statement responding to the new report, Lt. Col. John C. Becking, commander of the Philadelphia region of the Corps that oversees the dredging and dumping site, said the agency would "move ahead, and working with the residents, the Maryland Port Administration and the Maryland Department of the Environment, to work out solutions that will address the water issues and allow us to reopen this important disposal site."

Other documents obtained by Cecil Times show that Corps officials in Washington have been pressuring regional Corps officials to resume dumping at the Pond Neck Road site as a cost-cutting measure. (The site was closed to additional dumping in 1993 after concerns about possible pollution at the more than 200-acre dump site— which already has over 4 million cubic yards of contaminated dredge spoil piled up more than 40 feet high in some sections, according to the new US Geological Survey report.)

In a memo dated 6/30/11, Jo Ellen Darcy, Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works, directed regional officials to review "extending the life of existing and/or previously used disposal sites" and "options that were eliminated...due to state laws and/or the potential for public opposition must also be reconsidered."

The contaminated material dumped in Earleville comes from dredging of the Chesapeake and Delaware Canal and related shipping channels on the Chesapeake Bay. The Corps is concerned that it costs too much money to transport the contaminated spoil to other locations and the Earleville location is much closer to the Canal and shipping lanes—and cheaper for dumping.

The principal victims of the pollution documented in the USGS study are residents of the West View Shores community, which is located adjacent to the dump site. The dump site is also part of a preserve that houses a Cecil County-operated boat launch and recreational area and a state "wildlife management area," where local residents hunt for deer and game birds that are exposed to the pollutants— which may also be ingested by people who consume the meat of their hunting catch.

Apart from West View Shores, the other most polluted water/wells cited in the USGS report were for individual homeowners living along Pond Neck Road on the fringes of the dump/wildlife management area. Other nearby communities also affected include Bayview Estates, which is adjacent to West View Shores, and parts of the Sunset Pointe community.

In a statement on the pollution report, the Corps claimed the key problem was matters of "taste or color" with local wellwater. But the agency eventually admitted that there were "some issues" of heavy metals and pollutants "including beryllium and arsenic, in amounts that exceed the federal Environmental Protection Agency's health advisory levels."

That's putting it mildly, even according to the carefully-worded, scientific-coded language of the USGS report.

In its conclusions, that agency's report said that the Corps' dredging spoil dumpsite has "degraded local groundwater quality" by infiltrating several water aquifers in the area with "concentrations of some chemical constituents at levels greater than maximum allowable or recommended levels established in the US Environmental Protection Agency Safe Drinking Water Act, Secondary Drinking Water Regulations, Health Advisory Levels, and Maximum Contaminant Levels."

The Corps' dump is "the primary source of the poor quality of water that is found in the aquifers underlying it" and is "a source of the poor quality groundwater that supplies some domestic wells in the West View Shores residential community," the report said.

There's a joke—tinged with anger and cynicism— in the western Earleville community that you can tell who lives near the Army Corps' sludge dump: they never wear white shirts, never have white sheets or curtains in their homes, and maybe, just maybe, they are a little strange due to the toxic water they drink.

Even with the water conditioning and filtration systems that most area residents have installed and maintain at considerable personal expense, you can't use bleach in your laundry. It interacts with the pollutant-laden water and turns your laundry brown. We learned that the hard way some 20 years ago.

[DISCLOSURE: the editor of Cecil Times lives in the West View Shores community and has first-hand knowledge of the water problems in the area caused by, the USGS report now confirms, the Army Corps' pollution of our wells.]

Even with a costly water filtration system, you can't drink the water from your tap or use it for cooking. Most local residents buy bottled water (at considerable expense) and most filtration systems use tons of pricey bagged salt conditioners—which, tests show, elevate the sodium content of the water to unhealthy levels that are as much as several hundred times the acceptable sodium content. So even cooking pasta means pouring a gallon or so of bottled water into the pot. The coffee pot, the dogs' waterdish, watering the houseplants, etc....all at \$1 a gallon for bottled water from the supermarket we have to drive some 45 miles roundtrip to purchase.

Ken Cowley, a resident of Bay View Estates and a leader in the local opposition to the Corps' dumping in the community, has assembled a huge pile of documents, reports and scientific studies on the problem. But the most telling part of the story is his Rube Goldberg-style water filtration system at the Chesapeake Bay waterfront home that he and his wife, Nancy, designed and built more than a decade ago. The highly complex system is a monument to his concerns and expertise, as a retired executive with DuPont, where he designed operating plants for the giant chemical company in close consultation with engineering experts.

“It is just not acceptable for the Corps to resume dumping” in Earleville, he said. The Corps must fix the problems they caused, including compensating residents for the pollution and constructing a new water system to serve residents. But given the infiltration of the pollutants into several aquifers providing groundwater to local residents, there is no assurance that any “liner” or similar proposal would prevent further pollution that could be intensified by new dredge spoil dumping, he added.

Most residents of Bay View Estates are adamant that they want remediation of the pollution currently existing but they will not accept renewed dumping at the site to deposit many more tons of contaminants in the future.

But the situation is less clear in West View Shores, which has the worst contamination. That community has been divided for several years between factions ruling the local Civic Association and a community Environmental Association. Both groups have been embroiled in litigation over policies and control for open spaces and wetlands adjoining the Elk River and Chesapeake Bay.

The Civic Association has indicated, in newsletters and postings on its website, that it is primarily interested in getting the Corps to provide a new water system and may be willing to allow continued pollutant dumping in return. But many members of the environmental group are not in agreement with that concept.

In its report, the USGS concluded that the Corps' dump site “influences the groundwater flow and quality” in the area, especially “West View Shores, the Elk River and Pearce Creek...” The dump site is “not only a source of elevated concentrations of dissolved solids but also a geochemical driver of redox processes that enhances the mobilization and transport of redox-sensitive metals and nutrients.”

Translation for non-geeks: the Corps' dump site is polluting area residents' drinking water supplies and has affected the flow of groundwater.

That conclusion follows earlier state reviews that ended up with wishy-washy conclusions, such as a 1995 Maryland Environmental Service report that found area wells were polluted with “elevated concentrations of metals” but couldn't prove the Corps' dumpsite was responsible and said additional, more detailed studies were needed.

The Corps itself then commissioned its own consultant study that concluded in 1998 that the local problems were probably caused by “residential plumbing” problems that “could be contributing to the degraded groundwater quality in this community.” Blame it on the plumbers?

But now the USGS study—conducted over a two year period with multiple test wells drilled on the dump site, in West View Shores and along Pond Neck Road residential areas—found pollutants that “exceed federal drinking water standards” including chloride and sulfate levels in West View Shores.

In fact, some of the pollutants are up to 100 times greater than normal levels for “total dissolvable solids” pollution. “The elevated concentrations of TDS in both of these aquifers, which are attributed to groundwater flow from the (dump) are considerable. The TDS concentrations in excess of 5,000 mg/L in the Magothy aquifer in the eastern and south-ern locations described above are 90–100 times greater than the concentration of TDS in natural water in this aquifer...”

And the new study dismissed the earlier Corps' assertion that West View Shores homes had bad plumbing: “The patterns in groundwater flow and the low TDS concentrations beneath the WVS community indicate that it is unlikely that the community is responsible for the elevated TDS concentrations found at depth beneath their community.”

In fact, the new federal study said in the muted tones of federal report-writing, “The patterns in the TDS concentrations and groundwater flow beneath and in the vicinity of the (Corps' dump) indicate that the (dump) is the most likely source of elevated concentrations of TDS in groundwater...”

And the Corps' dump is also responsible for elevated levels of “pesticides and wastewater compounds” in area groundwater, especially along Pond Neck Rd. In addition, the study found elevated levels of arsenic, thallium and beryllium— heavy metals and toxic compounds— in some area water wells.

Earleville residents may soon be inviting county elected officials, the Corps—and Army officials in Washington—to a water-tasting event. We wonder how many of them will be willing to drink the water—raw, or even filtered by the expensive systems many residents have installed. Arsenic, anyone?