

Park toxins offer lesson on drilling

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More than a dozen years and a dozen million dollars after NYSEG was pressured to clean up toxic wastes in Oneonta's Neahwa Park, monitoring wells are showing contamination is still present.

We're as disappointed as anyone, because while the waste may not have a huge effect on the environment or residents, even a small chance of exposure is too much. State Department of Environmental Conservation officials said previously that people wading in the creek risk exposure to some of the chemicals associated with the waste, and there is a concern that the waste may be harmful to aquatic wildlife in the creek.

According to the DEC, four out of 12 test wells at the site of NYSEG's former manufactured-gas plant in Neahwa Park are showing higher-than-standard levels of toxic chemicals such as benzene, toluene, ethyl benzene and xylene. They are residues from the plant.

The soil was tainted by coal tar, which is a legacy of a manufactured gas plant that operated near what is now Damaschke Field from 1881 to 1950. The plant was torn down in 1956.

The facility used coal to generate natural gas for street lighting and residential uses, but carcinogenic byproducts were left in the soil. Now, more than 50 years after the plant was leveled and the area decontaminated, toxic material is still present.

And that's after years of a watercleansing process called air-sparging, the excavation and removal of tons of soil and replacing it with "clean" soil, and the ongoing project of sanitizing groundwater.

The lesson here is the awareness of just how difficult it is to rid an environmentally compromised area of toxic chemicals. We are lucky the groundwater in the Neahwa Park area is not be used for drinking water, because that is not always the case with chemical pollution.

We know from the experiences of people living near the former Sidney landfills on Richardson Hill that nightmares do happen. So, it's good that we're monitoring the cleanup in Neahwa Park, but what if the chemicals never dissipate? The issue raises questions about the prospect of natural gas drilling in the region because the process pipes contaminated water through groundwater pockets vertically and horizontally with "fracking." And we all know the best laid plans for safety don't always work.

News reports from northern Pennsylvania last week showed how some residents could ignite the vapors released from water faucets in their homes - presumably the result of the natural gas drilling occurring in the vicinity.

We hope the DEC takes these lessons seriously this year when devising updated regulations to govern natural gas drilling.