

Some Paw Paw residents unhappy with Coke plant as tainted water continues to cause problems

By [Aaron Dome | Special to the Kalamazoo Gazette](#)

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PAW PAW — Diane Stump has been drinking, cooking and brushing her teeth with bottled water since August 2007 to avoid her tainted well water.

Jill McLane Baker | Kalamazoo Gazette Ted and Marian Sinkewiz's ground water has been contaminated by wastewater from the Coca Cola plant which was sprayed on fields near their home. Two years later, it's not clear just how hazardous her well water is, but there's no doubt that property values in Stump's neighborhood have dropped.

"The biggest thing is health concerns and our property values being zip," said Stump, whose Paw Paw Road household is among more than 20 that stand east of a Coca-Cola Co. North America juice plant and whose well water has been tainted by the plant's juice wastes, which were sprayed on nearby fields.

Down the road, Ted Sinkewiz looks out over his back porch to ponds which he believes have been darkened by high levels of manganese. He said he spent \$10,000 on water-filtering equipment to keep iron from staining his fixtures, to no avail. He also owns a house next to his own home that's valued at more than \$200,000 but, he says, is now impossible to sell. "That house has been on the market for two years, and no one has taken a look at it," Sinkewiz said. "Legally, I have to tell anyone who wants to buy that house that the groundwater is contaminated. Would you buy it?"

Groundwater contamination caused by the spraying and a flood of e-mail from Paw Paw residents grabbed the attention of famed California environmental activist Erin Brockovich, whose legal team has visited Paw Paw and is planning legal action on behalf of Stump, Sinkewiz and other neighbors.

Decades of spraying

The spraying of untreated process water onto fields is a common and legal practice for food processors and is regulated by the state.

Juice wastes have been sprayed on fields near the Coca-Cola plant, just west of Paw Paw, since 1961. It was first done under former operator A.M. Murch and later by Coca-Cola's Minute Maid unit, which bought the plant in 1979.

Juice was sprayed on 10 acres starting in 1961, on 30 more acres beginning in 1986 and on 24 more acres in 2001 near the plant, located on Red Arrow Highway. Coca-Cola built its own wastewater-treatment plant in 2002, eliminating the need for spray fields.

The accumulation of juice wastes sprayed over more than 40 years on fields behind the plant caused a condition in the soil that releases naturally occurring iron, manganese and arsenic particles into groundwater, according to the MDEQ. The company had a permit to spray up to 400,000 gallons of process water per day. A report filed with the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality said it typically sprayed 175,000 to 240,000 gallons of process water per day, roughly enough to fill seven backyard swimming pools.

The accumulation of juice wastes sprayed for more than 40 years has caused the soil to release naturally occurring iron, manganese and arsenic particles into groundwater, according to the DEQ. Monitoring wells near the former spray fields have shown levels of these heavy metals above current federal limits.

Coca-Cola paid \$50,000 in fines to the DEQ for oversaturating its spray fields and allowing wastewater to drain to adjacent property.

Coca-Cola said in a report to the DEQ that other businesses may be to blame for negatively affecting the environment in the area. However, the DEQ has not identified any other businesses as possible sources of the contamination.

Health effects unclear

Coca-Cola has been supplying bottled water to more than 20 area residents whose well water has been shown through tests to contain levels of iron, manganese and arsenic above health-based criteria established under the state's environmental cleanup statute.

The concentrations of iron and manganese leached into groundwater as a result of this process often exceed the aesthetic and health-based standards for those parameters (Part 201, Environmental Remediation, of the NREPA). The recent change in the federal Maximum Contaminant Level (MCL) for arsenic from 0.050 milligrams per liter (mg/L) to 0.010 mg/L has caused arsenic to be added to the list of parameters of concern for these discharges. The 0.010 mg/l MCL for arsenic is also the generic residential clean up criteria under Part 201.

Ted and Marian Sinkewiz's ground water has been contaminated by wastewater from the Coca Cola plant which was sprayed on fields near their home. Although more than 20 homes are receiving bottled water from Coca-Cola, only nine have contaminant levels above environmental standards.

A plume of contamination is heading east from the former spray fields. Some residences in the vicinity of the plume are on bottled water. Others nearby are not.

Both of James Nearn's neighbors on Paw Paw Road are on bottled water, but he isn't. Nearn said his water tastes fine, and he hasn't had the iron-staining problems that others have had. His water was checked by Coca-Cola's testing company and found not to have levels of heavy metals in excess of federal standards, although he said he would appreciate more information from Coca-Cola.

“No one has called us to say what the latest is. It would be nice to have a follow-up test,” he said.

A file at the regional DEQ office near Plainwell contains complaints of nauseating odors coming from the spray fields dating back to the 1980s. But there have been no substantiated reports of illnesses directly caused by contaminants from the plant.

Van Buren and Cass County District Health Department officials could not be reached for comment.

The health dangers of drinking water with the level of heavy metals found in some monitoring wells near the Coca-Cola plant are unclear. The most worrisome contaminant is arsenic, which is tasteless, colorless and odorless. According to the DEQ, exposure to levels of arsenic in drinking water above the health standard during many years could produce various ailments, including skin cancers.

It's unclear whether any illnesses can be directly connected to the contamination.

The acceptable level for arsenic in drinking water has been recently reduced from 0.05 milligrams per liter to 0.01 milligrams per liter. Amy Perbeck, a toxicologist for the DEQ, said the change was based on new studies showing adverse health effects of arsenic but that the findings in those studies are being debated.

Residents contact Brockovich

Although Coca-Cola officials say they are working with the DEQ to fix the problem, Stump said the company has not communicated adequately with affected residents and has not conducted any public meetings since February 2008. Those concerns, as well as the decline of their property values, led area residents to sign up with Brockovich's team in preparation for legal action.

Brockovich is famous for her investigation of Pacific Gas and Electric Corp. for water contamination by a cancer-causing agent that resulted in a \$333 million damage settlement for residents of Hinkley, Calif., and the 2000 movie starring Julia Roberts the case inspired.

Brockovich's representative, Robert Bowcock, said at an April meeting in Paw Paw that the site drew the attention of Brockovich's team because of the “volume and persistence” of e-mail about the situation. At a meeting in June, representatives for Brockovich announced they had enough data collected and planned to file a lawsuit against Coca-Cola North America.

Where from here?

At a July public meeting with Bowcock and an attorney, residents commented back and forth, some calling the plant a good corporate citizen and a boon to Paw Paw, others deriding the plant's management as negligent. Coca-Cola's Paw Paw plant is one of the largest employers in Van Buren County, providing jobs for more than 500 workers.

Officials from Coca-Cola say they are cooperating with the DEQ. The company recently posted a video on YouTube touting its new wastewater plant and pledging to work to resolve the situation.

Stump and other residents say Coca-Cola has left those affected in the dark since management at the plant changed in February 2008. Sinkewiz said former plant manger Dirk Lunsford was straightforward about the groundwater situation.

“Lunsford and (current Coca-Cola environmental manager) Dan Fields knocked on my door three years ago and said, ‘We’ve put this waste in the ground, and we want to fix it,’ and I believed them,” Sinkewiz said. “If they hooked me up with village water, then I would’ve said, ‘Fine.’”

Sinkewiz said he has signed up with Brockovich’s legal team.

“I’m not looking to get rich, and I’m not asking Coke to buy my property,” he said. “But I have a house built in 1854 worth over \$200,000 that can’t sell.”

Tracey Sweat, general manager of Coca-Cola’s Paw Paw plant, said 10 residents were invited to a private meeting with Coca-Cola officials on June 10, but they declined, saying they wanted a public meeting. He said that a public meeting would “not be appropriate.”

At a recent Paw Paw Village Council meeting, Coca-Cola representatives said they would like to hook up nine properties currently receiving bottled water to the village water supply. Paw Paw Township Supervisor David Richardson said the township is currently considering the installation of a village water line, although no decision has been made.

Meanwhile, the township sent every household receiving bottled water a letter saying the taxable value of their properties has been lowered by 10 percent because of the issue with their well water.

Lawyers associated with Brockovich at an Aug. 25 meeting in Paw Paw distributed sign-up forms to those interested in joining a lawsuit.

http://www.mlive.com/news/kalamazoo/index.ssf/2009/09/some_paw_paw_residents_unhappy.html