

Water expert warns residents near Fennville's Birds Eye plant not to drink well water

By [The Grand Rapids Press](#)

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FENNVILLE -- A water expert and members of Erin Brockovich's environmental consulting firm had strong warnings tonight for residents living near the Birds Eye plant: Don't drink the water from their wells.

"Don't drink the water. And if you grow plants watered from the wells, don't eat the plants. The water and the plants could have arsenic in them," said Robert Bowcock, a California-based water expert who was in town to study the groundwater pollution problem many residents believe is being caused a nearby Birds Eye food processing plant.

Bowcock didn't pull any punches about who he believes is the source of the problem.

"The pollution in Fennville is absolutely the responsibility of Birds Eye," said Bowcock, who spoke to more than 120 residents at a two-hour meeting at the Fennville District Library.

Bowcock planned to review reports from the Michigan Department of Environmental Quality and other sources and expects Brockovich to come to Fennville in March to speak to residents about the problem.

Brockovich rose to fame in the 1990s after spearheading a \$333 million damage settlement from Pacific Gas and Electric for residents of Hinkley, Calif. who were exposed to a cancer-causing compound from the company's operation. A movie about the case, starring Julia Roberts, was made in 2000.

Birds Eye officials have denied being the source of the water contamination, saying the solution it sprays on its property from operations is basically sugar water and salt-laden organic matter. No representatives of the company were at the meeting.

The Michigan DEQ maintains the company's discharge strips soil of oxygen, freeing metal oxides into the groundwater.

"It also releases arsenic, heavy metals and bacteria that are suspended in the soil layers," said Bowcock, explaining the simple sugars flowing into the groundwater becomes food for bacteria and "other bugs" that depletes soil oxygen as it feeds.



DEQ test results show a contamination plume of about two square miles southeast of the plant that seems to be emanating from the Birds Eye property and contaminating wells and groundwater.

"I'm am very concerned about this. I have an acre of garden I plant every year near the Birds Eye plant and I eat that food," said Royal Streicher, who owns 17 acres of land that borders the Birds Eye property where the plant sprays its processing water.

Streicher said he has had to drill two new wells in the past nine years and has had problems with well filters becoming plugged nearly every other month.

Property owners at the meeting complained the metal oxide water is coloring their home siding and sinks and the smell from the water sometimes drives them from their homes.

"I'm hoping the people of Fennville will get together and fight this. They don't have to live with this disaster anymore," said Kari Craton, who wrote to Brockovich last month asking for help for their community.

Bowcock said a simple solution would be for Birds Eye to build a wastewater pretreatment system at the plant and put in drainage wells to change the course of the contamination plume.

"For the millions of dollars they've spent trying to prove it's not their fault, they could have done this already," Bowcock said.

http://www.mlive.com/news/grand-rapids/index.ssf/2009/02/water_expert_warns_residents_n.html