

Johnson Control unit wants to pay for connections to Lake Michigan water for residents with tainted wells

Lee Bergquist, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

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PESHTIGO – A manufacturer of fire-retardant foam whose operations have polluted groundwater and streams that have reached Lake Michigan is offering to connect residents that have tainted drinking water to the City of Marinette's municipal system.

Representatives of Tyco Fire Products — a unit of Johnson Controls International of Glendale — said Wednesday that the company is proposing to provide an estimated 100 property owners with a new water supply and believes Marinette's water system is the best option.

The offer came at a public meeting, called by Tyco, to provide an update on the extent of the contamination from company operations and how it plans to clean it up.

However, details are still being fleshed out and Marinette's mayor said talks with the city have been preliminary.

Also, some residents say they are concerned the company and state regulators have not done enough since the problems first came to light more than a year ago.

Tyco first notified residents in November 2017 of contamination problems and started providing bottled water and water purification systems to affected residents.

The pollution involves a class of compounds known as perfluorinated chemicals.

The discovery of them in the Town of Peshtigo represents the most widespread known detections in Wisconsin to date, according to state officials.

The chemicals are under growing scrutiny in Wisconsin because of their health risks and difficulty breaking down in the environment. Underscoring the concerns about the chemicals, Democratic Gov. Tony Evers is proposing additional staffing and funding to address the problem.

Epidemiology studies cited in a 2018 federal report suggest the chemicals can lead to increased risk of pregnancy-induced hypertension, liver damage, thyroid disease, asthma, decreased fertility, some cancers and a decline in response to vaccines.

Speaking to about 150 people at a local supper club, a Tyco representative said the company is proposing to pay to connect water from Marinette to those in areas of the Town of Peshtigo where the chemicals have been found.

John Perkins, vice president of environmental, health and safety for Johnson Controls, said the company estimates the process would take about two years. He estimated the cost at about \$1 million.

"The overarching vision is that we are committed (to providing safe drinking water)," Perkins said.

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Marinette Mayor Steve Genisot said discussions between Tyco and the city have been "very preliminary — that's just one possible solution."

He said many issues must be worked out, including potential annexation, long-term maintenance costs and whether affected residents want the water.

“It’s too early in the conversation,” Genisot said. “It’s going to take a lot of discussion.”

Jeff Lamont, a resident with a polluted well, said he liked the idea of getting Marinette water. “It’s better than what I have now,” Lamont said.

But he said he still has concerns because the compounds have also been found near the city’s water intake pipe off the shore in Green Bay. Levels detected in municipal drinking water are not considered a safety threat, according to state and local officials.

Firefighting chemicals sold worldwide

Tyco’s chemicals are sold for firefighting around the world. The chemicals have been manufactured in Marinette since 1912.

In November 2017, Tyco informed the state Department of Natural Resources it believed perfluorinated chemicals had spread outside its 380-acre fire technology center, where testing and fire control takes place.

That work by the company has resulted in fire retardants seeping into groundwater. The company has also discharged the chemicals into wastewater, and sludge from the wastewater has been spread on nearby farm fields for years.

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Many attending the meeting expressed frustration about the chemicals' impact on health, wildlife and land where waste sludge containing the chemicals have spread.

“Will it ever be cleaned up? asked one resident of the compounds in soil and groundwater.

"Often contaminants can’t be completely removed," said Roxanne Chronert, a remediation supervisor for the DNR,

“But it needs to be addressed adequately so there is no longer an ongoing release and no longer is a threat to human health and no longer a threat to the environment. That is our end game.”

Resident Andi Rich said she was troubled that Tyco failed to report the presence of chemicals on its property, immediately, in 2013 when it was first discovered.

'We don't want pretty. We want health.'

It wasn’t until four years later that the company said evidence of contamination had spread off the property and then began supplying drinking water to residents, the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reported.

“You knew that you were using those chemicals in that time frame,” Rich said. “We don’t want pretty. We want health. We want protection.”

Thus far, Tyco has sampled 169 private drinking water wells for two of the compounds — perfluorooctanoic acid, or PFOA, and perfluorooctane sulfonate, or PFOS.

Of that, results show 16 wells have compounds that exceed the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency’s health advisory for drinking water of 70 parts per trillion.

Another 42 wells showed some presence of the chemicals and 110 showed no signs of the chemicals.

As a next step, the company said that this year it will start evaluating the level of soil and groundwater contamination at the training center and how best to clean it up.

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