

LONG ISLAND/ENVIRONMENT

WATCHDOG

Decades of Grumman, Navy inaction before Calverton wells contaminated, documents show



Calverton, N.Y., is the site of a massive environmental cleanup. The U.S. Navy and Grumman Corp. have been blamed for decades of inaction that led to the contamination of groundwater there.

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includes the Peconic, which feeds fresh water into the region's estuary.

That potential is being realized today in the form of contaminants, known as PFAS chemicals, found in elevated levels in groundwater at the southern boundary of the site, not far from homes that draw water from private wells.

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The Navy, which owned the land and has sole cleanup responsibility, revealed in November that testing conducted in 2016 and 2017 had discovered higher levels of emerging contaminants than it previously had acknowledged. This month, the Suffolk County Health Department disclosed that 14 of 95 private wells it had tested south of the site showed the presence of some PFAS chemicals, with four exceeding new state standards — one by nearly 10 times.

The inaction as pollution spread is similar to what occurred 40 miles west in Bethpage, at a Grumman and Navy-owned facility there, records show.

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In Calverton, the data suggests that the contamination plume has spread beyond the one-mile radius inside which the Navy has agreed to do its own groundwater testing, according to Stan Carey, past chairman and board member of the Long Island Water Conference and a hamlet resident.

Pollution can travel through the region's sandy aquifer at a rate of one foot per day, he noted, meaning that chemicals may have traveled more than two miles since 1986, the year that documents show Grumman knew about groundwater contamination.

At least 14 homes along River Road in Calverton should be connected to public water, Carey said, while the risk of exposure may extend to several dozen more. He said the Navy should perform more extensive testing to track the plume's wider migration.

"They've refused to do the proper delineation and refused to hook the homes up for public water," Carey said.

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David Todd, a Navy spokesman, acknowledged the agency had found elevated PFAS levels along the

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"The Navy remains committed to its PFAS cleanup responsibilities ... and will continue to let the data and the science dictate the scope of the investigation and remediation."

-David Todd, Navy spokesman

"The Navy remains committed to its PFAS cleanup responsibilities at NWIRP Calverton and will continue to let the data and the science dictate the scope of the investigation and remediation," Todd said.

Environmentalists and advocates say some of the wells tested by Suffolk could be in the path of contamination from other areas of the Calverton site, particularly on the western side. They question whether the full extent of Grumman's pollution-causing activities has ever been fully known or disclosed, given the company's history at what was its primary manufacturing hub in Bethpage.

"What were they getting away with here that nobody was seeing?" asked Kelly McClinchy, who lives about a mile south of the Calverton property and is a leading advocate for additional testing and transparency.

Similar patterns

In Bethpage, a plume of groundwater contamination steadily spread for decades from under Grumman's 600-acre grounds and now measures more than four miles long and two miles wide. The state Department of Environmental Conservation, which oversees the cleanup there, announced Dec. 21 that the Navy and Grumman's successor Northrop Grumman have agreed to fully contain and clean up the plume after 40 years.

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In the case — which centered on whether Grumman provided timely notice to its insurers — Forrest also wrote that Grumman "was aware that there was sufficient contamination" to trigger potential liability as early as 1992.

That's when an environmental consultant working for the Navy cited the "high possibility of a threat to nearby drinking water well(s) by a threat of migration of hazardous substance in groundwater."

Yet, Forrest wrote, Grumman "declined to participate" in initial environmental investigations and said its responsibilities ended when it vacated the site in 1996.

Grumman "made a conscious determination to try and maintain ignorance and then use that ignorance as an excuse."

-U.S. District Court Judge Katherine B. Forrest

"Taken together, on their face, the documents demonstrate that Grumman chose a particular path in connection with Calverton, which this Court will refer to as the 'Ostrich Defense,'" Forrest wrote. "That is, it made a conscious determination to try and maintain ignorance and then use that ignorance as an excuse."

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aircraft, though operations also included paint shops, machine shops and degreasing and storage of oil and chemicals, according to a [Navy history](#) of the site.

In 1998, the majority of the land within the developed section of the facility was conveyed to the Town of Riverhead for economic redevelopment. Other areas have been converted into parkland and open space.

Lora Fly, remedial project manager for the Naval Facilities Engineering Systems Command's mid-Atlantic region, said in a statement that the Navy has spent more than \$45 million on Calverton cleanup activities since 1991, including \$1.2 million this fiscal year.

She declined to comment on how the Navy came to take full responsibility for the pollution there, referring questions about Northrop Grumman's efforts to Northrop Grumman.

"The Navy's commitment to clean up of [Naval Weapons Industrial Reserve Plant] Calverton is an enduring one: We'll be here for the duration," Fly said.

"Over 25 years ago, before the time Grumman terminated its lease at the Navy's Calverton site, Grumman completed its environmental activities."

-Tim Paynter, Northrop Grumman spokesman

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New chemicals of concern emerge

Forrest's decision focused on Calverton pollution caused by the solvents and fuel. But as those seeped down into the groundwater, so too did the PFAS chemicals — well before those emerged as toxic dangers.

PFAS chemicals are known as "forever chemicals," because they don't naturally break down. Scientists have linked the substances to negative health effects, such as increased cholesterol and increased risk of kidney and testicular cancer.

They include perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA), used in nonstick and stain-resistant products and once common in electrical wire insulation and paint and varnish, as well as perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFOS), which is used in firefighting foams.

Grumman also conducted fire training exercises in Calverton.

New York this year enacted a standard of 10 parts per trillion for the emerging contaminants, among the strictest in the country, and four times as strict as federal regulations. The Navy's 2016 and 2017 tests detected PFAS chemicals in concentrations as high as 36 times New York's new standard.

Grumman's Calverton operations took place in a sparsely populated area of protected woodlands near the Peconic River, where many homes pump their own drinking water instead of getting it from a public utility. In Bethpage, where the primary contaminant is the carcinogenic solvent trichloroethylene, or TCE, the company was intertwined with the suburban community around its gates.

Though these details differ, Long Island environmental advocates said the inaction and ignored warnings detailed in the court records about Calverton fit what happened to the west.

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"It's not rocket science. People's drinking water might be contaminated. And they need clean water," Esposito added.

Contamination from Grumman's Bethpage operations first shut down a public well in 1976. In Calverton, the Suffolk County Health Department told county legislators about the 1992 Navy report shortly after it was released, but the contamination garnered little public attention.

It wasn't until 2009 that many took notice, after the county discovered that the solvent and jet fuel plume, about a third of a mile wide, just south of the site, was larger and more concentrated than initially believed.

At first, the Navy said the plume might not need remediation because it wasn't close to public water wells. Eventually, under increasing pressure from residents and elected officials, the Navy installed a "fence line" treatment system that has prevented further fuel and solvent contaminants from leaving the property, but, environmentalists charge, has done little to address what may have already escaped.

Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-N.Y.), who helped push the Navy into installing the fence line system and since has pushed it to expand PFAS testing and pay for public water connections, said in a statement that the disclosures from the 2013 court case found by Newsday were "deeply disturbing."

"Given the new evidence that they have known for over 30 years that there was a risk to the drinking water of their neighbors, it's become painfully clear the Navy's response

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"I was really shocked," he said.

Noting past Navy statements that the southern plume might clean itself up, McClinchy said she's always viewed the agency as favoring a hands-off approach to anything that escaped the actual fence line system it installed.

"They're just going to let it keep moving down into the Peconic River and call it a day," she said.

PFOA and PFOS

- Human-made fluorinated organic chemicals that are part of a larger group of chemicals referred to as perfluoroalkyl substances (PFASs).
- PFOA and PFOS have been the most extensively produced and studied of these chemicals.
- They have been used to make products resistant to water, grease and stains, including: **carpets, clothing, fabrics for furniture, paper packaging for food** and other materials like **cookware**. They have also been used for **firefighting foam** at airfields and in a number of industrial processes.
- According to the EPA, exposure to PFOA and PFOS may result in adverse health effects, including **testicular and kidney cancers, liver damage** and developmental effects to fetuses or breastfed infants, such as **low birth weight** and **accelerated puberty**.

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