

Fearing Grumman water contamination, frustrated Manorville residents without access to public water ask Navy for relief

By Denise Civiletti - Feb 4, 2020, 5:56 pm



Kelly McClinchy at her kitchen sink in February 2020. Her family uses only bottled water. Photo: Denise Civiletti

Frustrated residents of Manorville who fear that their well water is contaminated took aim at the Navy at a local meeting last week.

Dozens of residents packed the Manorville Fire Department headquarters meeting room Wednesday night for the Navy's semiannual Restoration Advisory Board meeting, when the Navy reports on its progress cleaning up waste sites it still controls at the former Grumman property in Calverton.

But the residents had little appetite for the Navy's technical presentation. They had one thing on their minds: the water flowing out of the taps in their homes.

Worried about chemical contaminants in the groundwater on the former Grumman site and the contaminated plumes that have migrated off the site, residents in the area south of the industrial plant have been seeking connection to the Riverhead Water District. Some have been asking for years.



There was an unusually high turnout for the Navy's semiannual meeting of the Restoration Advisory Board on Jan. 29 in Manorville. Photo: Denise Civiletti

Last month, Old River Road resident Kelly McClinchy filed with the town a petition containing signatures of all but a handful of residents in the area, asking the town to provide their homes with public water.

Extending the nearest Riverhead Water District main to serve the area would cost millions of dollars because of the distance involved as well as the environmentally

sensitive lands the main would have to traverse, Riverhead Water District Superintendent Frank Mancini said.

“The way this works is the water district borrows the money and the properties served by the extension pay back the loan,” he said. The cost would be too much for the approximately 70 homes to bear and the town doesn’t have the money to pay for it.

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Residents look to the Navy, which owned what was originally a more than 6,000-acre site that was used by Grumman Aerospace and then Northrop Grumman to manufacture and test military aircraft.

The Navy transferred 2,900 acres to the Town of Riverhead in 1998, retaining certain known contaminated areas for cleanup.

To monitor contaminants, the Navy has been conducting field investigations at the Naval Weapons Industrial Reserve Plant, as the site is formally known, since the early 1990s, when Grumman left the site in 1996. They have since been working to remediate a range of chemical contaminants in soils and groundwater plumes — including known carcinogens subject to regulation by the federal Environmental Protection Agency and the State Department of Environmental Conservation.

Location Map Site 2 and Facility Wide PFAS SI



The Navy has identified "areas of concern" for PFAS on the former Grumman site. Navy technical officials say groundwater flows to the southeast, so homes to the southwest and due south of the site should not have PFAS contamination of their well water.

Image: U.S. Naval Facilities

Others, including a group of "emerging contaminants" such as 1,4 dioxane and PFAS, are not yet subject to meaningful limits and regulation by environmental authorities.

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Residents believe that the Navy site is responsible for contaminants in their private wells, though they lack hard proof. They are frustrated by the Navy's posture.

"The Navy has, for varying reasons, refused to test the water in our private wells," Old River Road resident Kelly McClinchy said. "Water testing done by the health department or private companies can be very expensive for residents. Because of

this expense, it is ultimately impossible for residents to get their water tested on a regular basis.”

Monitoring of the Navy property has disclosed the existence of volatile organic compounds (VOCs), 1,4 dioxane and per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances (PFAS). PFAS are a group of man-made chemicals that includes PFOA, PFOS, GenX, and many other chemicals, according to the EPA. PFAS have been manufactured and used in a variety of industries since the 1940s. The chemicals are very persistent in the environment and in the human body – meaning they don’t break down and they can accumulate over time, according to the EPA. There is evidence that exposure to PFAS can lead to adverse human health effects.

There are many potential sources of the same chemicals in groundwater, however.

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Residents on one road have had their wells contaminated by MTBE, a chemical once used as a gasoline additive. New York banned the use of MTBE in 2004. The substance turned up in some wells in late 2016. The State DEC installed whole-house carbon filtration systems in those homes and tests their water monthly. The monthly testing has detected other chemicals as well: benzene, isopropylbenzene and acetone among them — even post-filtration. Those substances have so far not exceeded federal or state limits.

One man brought his blood test results to the Navy meeting. “When I had blood work done they tell me I have mercury poisoning and arsenic poisoning,” he said. “How is that possible? It’s because I’m getting it from my water. I’m showering in it.”



Clare Bennett told the Navy representatives the Navy should test for contaminants in the western portion of the site. Photo: Denise Civiletti

Residents at the meeting expressed anger at the Navy's failure to do any field investigations in the western portion of the site, while Navy officials tell them that groundwater from known contaminated areas flows east of their homes.

"You're not testing other sites where things might have been dumped," said resident Clare Bennett, whose well is contaminated with MTBE.

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"When the facility was closed we had a list of areas where activities took place," said Navy official Lora Fly of the Naval Facilities Engineering Command/Mid-Atlantic. That didn't include the western portion of the site, she said.

"People would have to show us where things happened," Fly said. "Unless we have eyewitnesses or some other fact that would show us that, we don't have a cause. The contamination can be coming onto our property just as easily as it could be coming off our property," she said. "Even if we put wells there we still would have no answers there. We wouldn't know if it was coming from someone else."



Lora Fly of the Naval Facilities Engineering Command/Mid-Atlantic addresses the audience. Photo: Denise Civiletti

Adrienne Esposito of Citizens Campaign for the Environment however said there are "many examples" of dumping on other sites where the Navy or other federal agencies were unaware of it until neighboring wells became contaminated.

"What they are saying is reasonable and logical," Esposito told Fly. "Just because you don't have a record of the area being used as a disposal site doesn't mean the area was not used as a disposal site," she said, drawing applause from the packed room.



Adrienne Esposito of Citizen's Campaign for the Environment tells Navy representatives that the residents' concerns are legitimate. Photo: Denise Civiletti

"This is a classic Navy response," Esposito said after the meeting. "They move at a glacial pace and make excuses." Esposito said the Navy should allow public input into the next work plan by putting it out for public comment. "These are legitimate concerns. I don't know how these people sleep at night," she said of the Navy representatives. "They should just test the private wells."

Rep. Lee Zeldin's district manager Mark Woolley said the congressman wants extensive testing done, including outside the fence that runs along the perimeter of the site.

"These folks here ... parts per trillion, it doesn't matter. Pounds, it doesn't matter," he said referring to units of measure used to describe the quantity of a contaminant.

"These folks are very concerned because their drinking water is being impacted by what's happened on the Grumman property. It has come past that magic fence

— it's really not so magic," he said. "If there's remediation that needs to be done off the property, that's something the Navy needs to be considering, too including impacts on the Peconic River and Swan Pond as well," Woolley said.

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"You need to look at all the property, including the west end. While I appreciate what the Navy's been doing, we want you to pick up the pace," Woolley said.

"This has to be mitigated," Riverhead Town Supervisor Yvette Aguiar told the Navy representatives. "We need a risk assessment done. That's how you have to deal with complicated issues like these. We have to assess everything and come up with a mitigation plan," she said.



Kelly McClinchy and her neighbor Ron Martz, look at a map showing homes that have been tested for contaminated water, as Martz points out homes where he says people have been sickened with cancer. Photo: Denise Civiletti

The area's modest homes are tucked into large tracts of preserved pine barrens in the southwest corner of Riverhead Town. There is an almost other-worldly beauty to the quiet woodlands, making it difficult to imagine fighter jets that once roared into the sky from Grumman's runways, shattering the silence.

McClinchy's dining room table is cluttered with reports and maps and copies of the petition she brought to town hall last month.

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"The bottom line here is that the Navy has been testing this site for well over two decades," McClinchy said. "Clean-up has been limited to very small areas within a very large property. The community understands that dumping of contaminants has occurred throughout the property. We know for certain that these chemicals have found their way outside of the 'invisible fence line' as discussed at the meeting. But the Navy will not commit to cleaning up any of these areas," she said.

"In the meantime, every resident of the Manorville section of Riverhead worries every single time they turn on the tap," McClinchy said. "We know (with proof from the Navy testing) that these contaminants are in the area, and the contaminants are moving. The Navy testing will continue for decades to come. And it is very possible that new contaminants could be discovered," she said.

"How long do we wait? How many people fall ill?" she asked.

Neighbor Ron Martz, a lifelong resident who lives in the house he grew up in, talks about what he believes to be an unusually high cancer rate in the area. On a map spread out on McClinchy's table, Martz quickly points out 12 homes out of 69 where residents have been stricken with cancer. Some, including his own mother, died of it.

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Asked if they've ever thought about moving, both quickly say no.

"Just look out there," Martz said, pointing to the scenery beyond the picture window in McClinchy's dining room. "That's why I could never leave," Martz said.

Suffolk County Water Authority Chairman Patrick Halpin said the water authority has active mains much closer to the affected community than the Riverhead Water District's mains.

Even though the neighborhood is within the Town of Riverhead, the Suffolk County Water Authority, by law, can provide public water to any area in Suffolk County that's not served by another water district, Halpin said.

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"We'd be happy to meet with the community to discuss it," Halpin said. "Our mission is to provide pure water to Suffolk County," he said.

"The water authority would be happy to test people's wells free of charge," Halpin said.

"Something like this is an emergency," he said. "We have the resources to be very creative in a situation like this."

The SCWA is investing over \$170 million to install water filtration systems to deal with emerging contaminants, he said. Also, the water authority is suing the chemical companies, according to Halpin.

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The water authority has over 600 wells and tests its entire system monthly. “We know more about the quality of our wells and our water than ever before — testing down to parts per billion and parts per trillion,” Halpin said.

In a statement on Thursday, U.S. Senator Charles Schumer called for the federal government to establish a national drinking water standard for PFAS. He said he supports “comprehensive and stringent legislation to combat toxic PFAS pollution across Long Island and New York.”

Schumer said the federal government must “require PFAS producers to acquire a Clean Water Act permit and establish federal resources for the cleanup of existing pollution sites like in Calverton,” Schumer said.

“I will work with community leaders to make sure they are getting responses and results from the Navy,” he said.

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