

Editorial

Take a stand today for a cleaner tomorrow

You can make a difference.

We know during the holidays you're busy, too busy, wrapping packages and baking cookies. Put down your scissors, put down your rolling pin.

Pick up your pen. It's mightier than the sword. And the battle is for a healthy future for your town.

For more than a decade, we've written about pollutants left behind on land in Guilderland and New Scotland, land where the Army ran a depot from 1941 to 1969. The depot was set up as a storage center for the military during World War II and once covered 650 acres. Most of it now belongs to the Northeastern Industrial Park.

The old depot site is near the Black Creek, which feeds the Watervliet Reservoir, Guilderland's major source of drinking water. Indeed, the Army diverted the creek into two halves, and sent waste into the creek or buried it nearby.

Earlier this month, officials from the Army Corps of Engineers state agencies as well as a cadre of dedicated citizens, members of the Restoration Advisory Board, met to discuss Area of Concern 1, which has the highest concentration of health risks of the nine areas identified by the corps.

An Army landfill there has contaminated a groundwater plume with volatile organic compounds, according to an engineer reporting to the board. Such compounds are emitted as gases from some solids or liquids; the chemicals evaporate easily at room temperature and are common groundwater contaminants.

Between the landfill and a nearby pond that has contaminants, the engineer said, the water is dangerous to drink, although neither are a source for drinking water and the engineer felt confident the heavy metals aren't going to move anywhere.

The pond is about 1,500 feet from the main channel of the Black Creek, which feeds the Watervliet Reservoir. Chemicals are far more mobile than metals and so pose more of a risk, according to a representative from the state's Department of Environmental Conservation.

We're pleased that the corps has recommended the most thorough of four options for containing the chemicals, which includes a landfill cap and soil cover, chemical oxidation treatment of the groundwater, carbon treatment of surface water, and land-use controls.

The problem comes with the cost, which is estimated at \$3 million. The money for cleanup comes from the federal Defense Environmental Restoration Program for Formerly Used Defense Site program, which is scandalously under funded.

"We have a 100-year backlog worth of work," Gregory Goepfert, the project manager for the corps, told us last year. "With \$500 million worth of work that we know of, we get about five million dollars a year to work with," he said of funds for similar sites all across New York and New Jersey.

The government polluted these areas; it should pay to clean them. The United States created nine polluted sites now labeled areas of concern in our backyard and each one of them should be cleaned. If the United States can spend billions of dollars to try to set aright a country it invaded, it ought to be able to spend millions to clean up the mess the Army left behind in our own country decades ago.

If speaking out on one area of concern can get results, so can speaking out on others.

Federal funds of \$650,000 were secured two years ago to clean toxic waste from one of the areas of concern, on a parcel now privately owned by Joan Burns. She and her late husband bought their dream house in the country with 40 acres on Depot Road in 1943. The dream turned to a nightmare. They had not been told about Army waste buried there and Burns, a nurse, said her family suffered "a lot of health problems" that she believes are associated with the waste.

Her husband died of cancer in 1995. "He was the one out on the land," she said. Her horses died of cancer, too.

Seven years ago, frustrated with lack of funds for testing, we put on tall rubber boots and rubber gloves, and, under the direction of Peter Buttner, then chair of the Restoration Advisory Board, we scooped up samples of the bottles that were surfacing throughout the defoliated areas of Burns's property.

We were back in 2004 at the invitation of the current co-chair of the advisory board, Thadeus Ausfeld. We watched him poke at bright green baseball-sized masses recently uncovered on Burns's property, and we wrote about her plight yet again.

We were gratified to hear last year, both from Burns and from the Army Corps' project manager, Gregory Goepfert, that Enterprise editorials and news stories were part of the reason federal funds were secured.

"We're woefully under funded," Goepfert told us then. Those were the very same words we heard years before from Senator Hillary Clinton when we asked her about depot cleanup. "We're woefully under funded," the Senator said, while noting the deteriorating state of clean water nation-wide.

"When I go to funding sponsors and say, 'There's a high level of public interest,' that helps, no doubt about it," said Goepfert of securing funds for cleanup projects in our backyard.

So pick up your pen. Dec. 27 is the official due date for public comments on the cleanup method, but Goepfert said he would accept anything that he receives before Jan. 9. Detailed information on the project and contact information to submit comments can be found online at www.fsadva.com, which stands for Former Schenectady Army Depot - Voorheesville Area. Copies of the study are available at the public libraries in Guilderland and Voorheesville.

Comments may be addressed to: Gregory Goepfert, Project Manager, United States Army Corps of Engineers, New York District, CENAN-PP-E, Room 1811, 26 Federal Plaza, New York, NY 10278.

"You've got to respond to this guy now," said Ausfeld at the December meeting. He operated the town of Guilderland's water plant for years and co-chairs the Restoration Advisory Board with Charles Rielly. "This is what we've worked for the last 10 or 12 years," said Ausfeld.

Let's help that work come to fruition. As citizens in a democracy, we are responsible for what our government does or does not do. Take a stand today for a cleaner tomorrow.

— Melissa Hale-Spencer

