

# Cecil County Council, Exec Question Army Corps on Pollution of Earleville Wells; No Fed \$ for Fixing Homeowners' Water

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The US Army Corps of Engineers told the Cecil County Council and County Executive Tari Moore on Monday that the agency plans to install a “liner” or “slurry” wall to contain existing contamination of groundwater from their Pearce’s Creek dump site in Earleville. But the federal agency will not provide money to clean up area residents’ wells and the Corps’ key priority is to resume additional sludge dumping at the site.

Cecil County officials served notice at the meeting that cleaning up local residents’ wells was not the county’s financial or operational problem and that the costs and responsibilities for solving the water supply contamination must be borne by those responsible for the pollution.

A newly released study by the US Geological Survey found that the Corps dump site is responsible for pollution of several area aquifers and has contaminated many local homes’ water wells, especially in the West View Shores community and adjacent Bay View Estates. [SEE Cecil Times special report here:

<http://ceciltimes.com/2013/01/new-federal-study-proves-army-dumping-poisoned-earleville-wells-army-wants-to-resume-dumping-in-cecil-county/>

At Monday’s meeting, top regional Corps officials were accompanied by a phalanx of Maryland Port Administration (MPA) officials, but notably absent from the meeting—held at the Corps’ local office in Chesapeake City adjacent to the C&D Canal that is operated by the Corps—were any representatives of state environmental authorities.

The Maryland Department of the Environment (MDE) holds a trump card: before dredged material/sludge dumping—which was suspended in 1993—can resume at the Earleville site, the state agency must grant a water quality permit. “We can’t just dredge” without state environmental approval of a site for dumping the dredge spoil, said Lt.Col. Chris Becking, the commander of the Philadelphia District of the Corps that oversees the C&D Canal.

But, in practical political terms, the Port Administration has a trump card of its own: the economic clout of the Port of Baltimore and its top priority to dredge shipping channels in the Chesapeake Bay, especially as a new generation of superships and tankers is expected to demand ever deeper channels. Dumping the dredge spoils, at the cheapest possible cost, is crucial to the state’s politically potent shipping interests.

According to a document provided to Cecil County officials, the MPA will seek state money to “provide safe drinking water to residents whose wells have been impacted by” the federal dumpsite. That indicates just how high a priority continued dredging and dredge spoil dumping is for the MPA—letting the federal Corps off the financial hook for the pollution its dump site has caused and asking Maryland taxpayers to foot the bill for cleaning up local wellwater contamination.

Standing up to the Corps/Port priorities are about 300 homeowners who live near the dumpsite, which is located at the end of Pond Neck Road. For two decades, area residents have complained of problems with their drinking water but their complaints fell on deaf ears until the new USGS study confirmed in scientific terms what they knew from their water taps.

Moore told Corps officials Tuesday that area residents were “not seeing a high level of trust” with the federal agency and its past responses to community concerns.

“I don’t think there’s anything we want to try and hide from you,” Becking said. But, he added, the Corps’ top priority was trying to “fix the long term problem” of containing existing dump site pollution so that it could get state MDE approval to continue to dump more shipping channel dredge spoil in Earleville.

County Council President Robert Hodge (R-5) said that the county government would not assume financial or oversight responsibility for any water systems or pollution remediation for local residents’ water wells. He said that was the responsibility of those responsible for the pollution—the Corps, according to the new USGS study.

Hodge noted that the county had recently sold its water systems to the private Artesian firm and the last thing the county wanted was responsibility for a local water system “in the middle of nowhere” such as Earleville.

Tony DePasquale, operations chief for the Philadelphia district office of the Corps, repeatedly downplayed the dump’s impact on local residents, saying the problems were “filterable” by the water treatment systems that many residents have installed at their own expense. And he asserted that some of the problems could be attributed to improper residential plumbing, such as some homes—for which he provided no locations—that he claimed had “20-foot deep wells” located immediately adjacent to septic systems.

In fact, most homes in the most polluted West View Shores community have water wells in the front of their property drilled to 85-feet or more depths, with septic fields located in the rear of the homes, substantially distant from water well supplies.

A previous study by the Corps itself attempted to blame West View Shores’ water problems on bad residential plumbing, but the new USGS study rejected that claim, stating, “The patterns in groundwater flow... indicate that it is unlikely that the community is responsible for the elevated TDS (Total Dissolved Solids pollutants) concentrations found at depth beneath their community.”

DePasquale also asserted that all drinking water in the local community was “safe” and “all of the water coming out of the tap is potable water.” But under questioning by Cecil County officials he admitted that only 31 wells out of a potential 300 had ever been individually tested by the county’s Health Department several years ago.

Hodge questioned whether the Corps would now pay for testing of individual homeowners’ wellwater to determine the extent of problems. Corps officials said no, and suggested that the jointly county-state financed county Health Department should pay those costs.

“I don’t know how you can develop a plan,” Hodge said, until all wells in the community are tested. “I think you need to know more about what’s going on in the development,” he said.

In a document supplied to Cecil County officials, the Corps said it would seek federal money in Fiscal 2014 and 2015 to build its proposed “barrier” to contain the existing dumpsite pollution and planned to resume dumping new contaminated dredge spoil in Earleville in the fall of 2015.