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Water-treatment plant opens in Port Jeff

August 22, 2011 by JENNIFER SMITH / jennifer.smith@newsday.com

Thirty-two years after chemicals from the Lawrence Aviation Industries manufacturing site turned up in local groundwater, officials unveiled a water-treatment plant in [Port Jefferson](#) that they said marked a turning point in the cleanup of one of the region's most notorious Superfund sites.

The facility, in a building near the corner of Caroline Avenue and Brook Road, is intended to treat pollution from a mile-long underground plume of solvents emanating from the former factory.

"We're here today to celebrate a milestone," Walter Mugdan, regional Superfund director for the federal [Environmental Protection Agency](#), said at a news conference Monday. "Its completion is a major step forward toward cleaning up the legacy of pollution."

The \$2 million water-treatment plant started operating this month.

Four wells at the plant pump up groundwater fouled by the industrial chemical trichloroethylene, which is a potential carcinogen. The water passes through two separate filtration systems -- a device that blows air into the water to remove some compounds, and a carbon [filter](#) that strips out additional contamination -- and, once clean, is released to nearby Old Mill Pond and Old Mill Creek.

Federal officials said the plant would operate for the next two decades, until volatile organic chemicals reach "an acceptable level."

The water-treatment facility is the third step of the [EPA's](#) \$24 million cleanup plan for the Superfund site, located on Sheep Pasture Road in [Port Jefferson Station](#). About \$15 million has been spent so far.

Over the past two decades thousands of drums filled with toxic chemicals and sludge were carted away from the property, officials said. An estimated 16,000 tons of PCB-tainted soil was removed in 2009, and a separate water-treatment plant was built there the following year to treat groundwater at the source of the pollution.

The contaminant plume extends to Port Jefferson Harbor, passing underneath several homes that have since been connected to public water. It also runs beneath Port Jefferson High School, where EPA has installed venting devices to ensure that solvents in groundwater do not vaporize and seep into school buildings.

Contamination was so extensive that federal prosecutors brought a criminal case against business owner [Gerald Cohen](#) in 2006. [Cohen](#) pleaded guilty in 2008 to violating federal environmental laws and was sentenced to serve a year and a day. He began serving his term this year at a federal prison in Fort Dix, N.J., said Maria Jon, the EPA's remedial project manager.

Federal prosecutors also are pursuing a civil suit against Cohen over cleanup costs.

"The people that were doing the polluting were conscious of their action, were conscious that it could bring harm to other people," said state Sen. [Kenneth LaValle](#) (R-Port Jefferson).

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