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In this file photo, next to a sign on the Graue Family's lawn in North Tonawanda, are from left, Brett, wife Becky and daughter Samantha with environmental attorney Christen Civiletto. Photo was taken on March 28, 2017. (Robert Kirkham/Buffalo News)

DEC reports no surface contamination around Wheatfield landfill but ill resident doesn't buy it

By **Thomas J. Prohaska** (https://buffalonews.com/author/thomas_prohaska/) | Published July 11, 2017 | Updated July 11, 2017

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The state Department of Environmental Conservation reported Tuesday that toxic chemicals from the old Niagara Sanitation landfill cannot be found on the surface on properties surrounding the site on the Wheatfield-North Tonawanda border.

The DEC said it tested the top two inches of soil on 23 properties abutting or close to the landfill. The agency said the results "confirm that no contamination from the landfill is impacting surface soils on nearby properties."

Brett A. Grawe, who lives near the site, doesn't believe it.

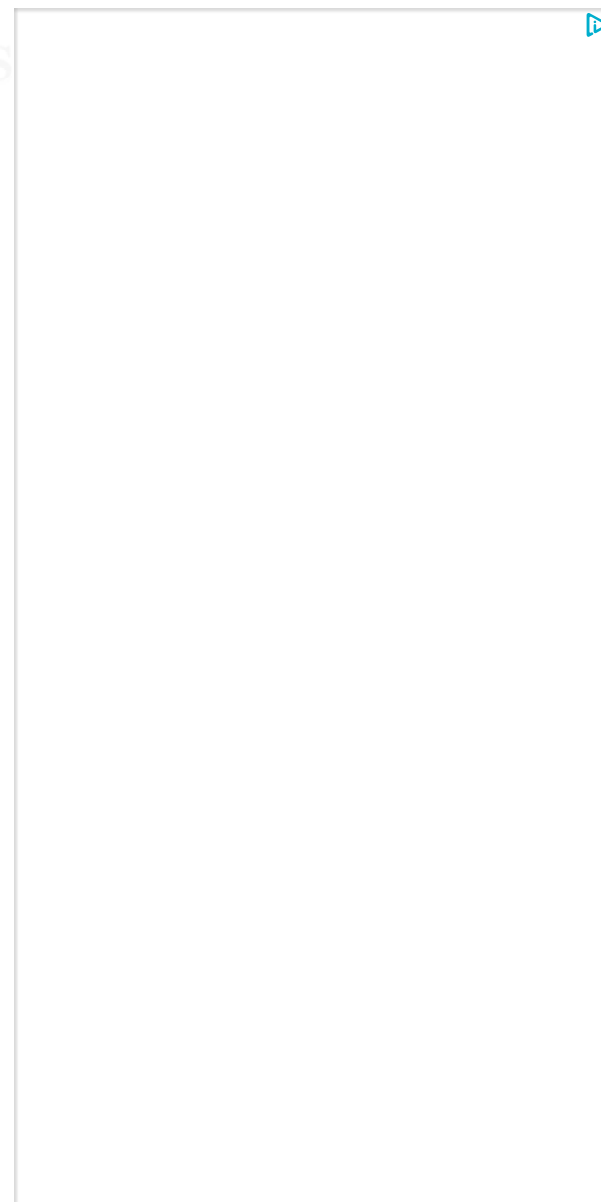
"They did different testing than we did," Grawe, who has liver cancer, said by phone from a bed in Rochester's Strong Memorial Hospital. "They went down two inches."

He said sarcastically that he is hospitalized "in correlation with what's not in my yard."

There are more tests to come as the DEC double-checks its earlier findings that chemicals are not leaking from the landfill.

Those tests will include samples of subsurface soil and groundwater, as well as digging trenches around the perimeter of the landfill "to verify that no waste was placed off the site property. DEC may undertake additional testing depending on the findings of the investigation," the department announced.

Grawe and several other past and present residents of Forbes Street in North Tonawanda paid for privately conducted tests. Their tests detected toxic chemicals similar to those found at Love Canal on their properties and, in some cases, in their basements.



The state Department of Transportation placed some waste from Love Canal in the Niagara Sanitation landfill in 1968, after disturbing it during the construction of the LaSalle Expressway in Niagara Falls.

The DEC ordered the Love Canal waste be removed from the Wheatfield site, and it was dug up and hauled away in 2015. Attorneys for the Forbes Street families contend not all of the Love Canal waste was removed.

The DEC previously tested surface soil within the landfill and concluded there was little surface contamination and most of the contamination found was near the center of the 18.7-acre dumpsite.

Gov. Andrew M. Cuomo, however, ordered the DEC to test surface soil on properties around the landfill, too. The samples were taken May 10–11.

“The results are good news for the residents of the Wheatfield community,” DEC Commissioner Basil Seggos said. “Gov. Cuomo has made getting to the bottom of this situation a priority to protect the public and provide residents with the peace of mind that comes with having the most accurate information available.”

Results were sent to property owners last week.

Attorneys for the residents told The News in April that private tests found as many as 20 toxic chemicals in residents' homes and yards, including cancer-causing dioxin, a characteristic Love Canal chemical.

“We’re finding it in the kitchens, in the bedrooms, not just in the basements,” attorney Michael G. Stag of New Orleans said at the time.

“The type of dioxin we’re seeing is an exact fingerprint of the Love Canal waste.”

Chad Staniszewski, DEC project manager, denied attorneys' claims that any Love Canal waste was missed in the 2015 cleanup. He said no PCBs were found in the off-site testing, even though they are known to be in the landfill. Dioxin always appears with other specific chemicals, and he said those chemicals also were not present.

"We can make no connection between chemicals in the landfill and chemicals that were detected in those residential properties in surface soils," Staniszewski said.

Grawe, whose wife and four children also have chronic medical issues, is convinced that the landfill is the cause of their problems. Their dogs also have tumors, Grawe said in an interview earlier this year.

He is one of 64 current and former residents of the neighborhood around the landfill who have filed lawsuits against the Town of Wheatfield, which has owned the landfill since Niagara Sanitation shut down in 1968. Other defendants in the suits include companies believed to have disposed industrial waste at the Nash Road landfill.

The DEC's announcement said that it did find one instance of mercury in a yard.

That test "detected a concentration of mercury that slightly exceeds the residential soil standard but is one-half the concentration acceptable for a commercial use site. This slightly elevated concentration of mercury was determined to be an anomaly, not indicative of off-site migration of contamination from the landfill," the DEC said.



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– Thomas Prohaska has been a reporter for The Buffalo News since 1995. A graduate of Starpoint Central High School and St. Bonaventure University, he previously worked at WLVL Radio in Lockport.

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