

EPA proposes CTS Superfund site near Asheville for priorities list

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SKYLAND — The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency announced Tuesday that it has proposed including the former CTS of Asheville plant on its list of the nation's most environmentally contaminated properties.

Placement on the National Priorities List could speed cleanup of the site off Mills Gap Road, where officials have found ground and well water contaminated with an industrial solvent and suspected carcinogens.

The EPA has 40,000 sites on its Superfund list. Of those, there are 1,290 on the priorities list, including 35 in North Carolina and six in Western North Carolina.

Residents near the plant for years have pushed government agencies to pay closer attention to threats from the former plant site. Some said Tuesday they were skeptical the latest step would bring action.

“If I thought it was going to be a short period of time and maybe something would be done, I guess I would be elated about it,” resident Dot Rice said. “But I know we will just be put on a list and wait and wait for something to be done.”

“All we can do is hope and pray something will be done and we can get our community back,” she said.

Industrial switches and resistors were manufactured at the site from 1952-86. The EPA first started investigating contamination at and around the plant in 1990.

Tests of the Rices' drinking water done in 1999 revealed levels of the industrial solvent trichloroethylene, or TCE, were more than 4,000 times what the government considers safe.

Contamination since has shown up in a handful of other drinking water wells surrounding the site.

Inclusion on the priorities list would bring a more extensive investigation and cleanup, although that could still take years, said Jennifer Wendel, National Priorities List coordinator.

Calls to CTS on Tuesday were not immediately returned.

The EPA has attempted to list the CTS site on the priorities list in the past, but it didn't qualify.

Wendel said new geological information linking contamination at the site to contamination in wells helped elevate the site this time.

The former plant will be listed in the federal register on Thursday, after which the public will have 60 days to comment. The earliest the site could be listed on the final priorities list would be this fall, Wendel said.

Residents, who have been critical of the way EPA has handled cleanup at the site, said the list is just more red tape. Instead, they are calling for an enforcement-led cleanup and for federal charges to be brought against the EPA for how it has handled cleanup at the site. Residents last month filed a lawsuit

against CTS.

“The NPL is something that is used as a description,” said resident Tate MacQueen. “We don't need any more descriptions. We need action.”