Living in the Shadow of Hitachi

Robert Linton noted that Home Township had already paid out $55,000 in legal fees. The Michigan Township Association (MTA) gave the township $5,000 to help with their legal-defense fund. Hitachi was claiming that the factory should not have been taxed since 1993. Essentially, the company did not want to pay property tax on the ‘worthless’ land it helped to pollute. This was huge because it would have impacted the entire state. If Hitachi had won, any business would be able to pollute their property and not have to pay property taxes because it was contaminated rather than paying to help clean it up. The financial fallout from this case would have been enormous.

A member of the Michigan Environmental Council Dave Dempsey was quoted as saying, “It sort of reminds me of that old cliché of somebody murdering their parents and then asking for mercy because they are an orphan. It defies common sense.” Hitachi was employing 300 people at the time (at one time they had employed between 600-700 workers) and was receiving police and fire protection from the township, but yet they felt they should not have to pay anything in taxes.

When a cleaning solvent called TCE was detected in the wells of four homeowners who lived within a quarter mile of Hitachi, the company began supplying them with bottled water and then in 1998 they paid the Village of Edmore $100,000 to extend water lines out to the affected residents along M-46.

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There was also a $75,000 escrow account for maintenance of the water lines. McCune claimed that the affected residents were given free water for the last three years, but are now charged.

Rick McCune explained to me that most of his customers lived in the Muskegon area and they read the Grand Rapids Press article about the contamination next to his property. As I stated before, he found very valuable race horses. Within two days of the publication the owners removed their horses from the McCune Ranch. His business was destroyed, his livelihood was gone and his land no longer held any value. The McCune’s have never received any compensation for their loss. Rick and Carol have never been told that their land is contaminated, but when his well went dry this past August, the health department did not want to issue him a license to drill a new water well. He had to visit the Village of Edmore and have them make out a paper that they would not supply him with water from the village. After obtaining a letter from Village Manager Neil Rankin, McCune was able to have a new water well drilled to a deeper depth of 91 feet (the old one was 63 feet deep). However, the Montcalm County Health Department required a more expensive water hook-up using copper instead of steel.

McCune showed me charts pertaining to the many test wells on the old Hitachi property and the area to the north and east of the plant. However, there was only one test well placed south of the factory and it was on Rick McCune’s property right of way. At the time, Bob Miller was the Human Resources Director for Hitachi Magnetics. McCune said he was not told about the test well and he did not give permission to have it drilled on his right of way. The well was installed when Rick was not home. It has since been sealed and locked, but Rick was never provided any information about its findings.

According to the Grand Rapids Press article, the Department of Natural Resources issued a memorandum in 1985, which stated that mercury contamination was identified as far back as 1970 downstream [there is a small creek that flows east] from the General Electric/Hitachi plant. In 1971 GE entered into an agreement with the state to reduce the mercury levels being discharged from the plant by installing additional treatment facilities and “has generally complied with the permit limitations.”

Since the Hitachi Magnetics plant closed in 2004, most of the old structures have been torn down. The water tower is scheduled to be dismantled. There is an underground aquifer water treatment system that pumps 185 gallons a minute filtering the water and cleaning the soil on the old Hitachi property and there are numerous test wells which surround the land that are monitored for Trichloroethene; cis-1, 2-Dichloroethene; trans-1, 2-Dichloroethene; 1,1, 1-Trichloroethane; Dichloroethane and 1,1-Dichloroethane. Most of the contamination that was shown up at the different test wells is from Trichloroethene. The latest test well information Rick has was dated October 2014. He also has a comparison chart from 2011 and 2012. The charts explain the acceptable levels of contamination and list the actual numbers/levels and dates for when the wells were tested. The filtered water is then dispensed through the ground and McCune said from there, it takes the path of least resistance. Rick compared it to electricity. He explained that the sub-soil is primarily made up of sand, gravel and clay. Rick was not able to fully explain exactly how the filtration system works. However, since the new road was placed on the Hitachi/Sunrise Center property, he thinks the underground filtered water may have changed direction and he is awaiting new test well results.

The McCune’s have stayed on their farm because it is their home and the farm no longer has any sale value. Now the only horses he has on the farm is his own. Rick said he found other odd jobs to work at until he was able to draw social security. Living in the shadow of Hitachi has proven to be a severe hardship for the McCune’s and no one seems to care.