Alma College fundraiser a lead in to PBB testing in Ithaca

Alma College will have a select showing of the television docudrama Bitter Harvest that depicts the 1973 Michigan PBB contamination mishap that potentially still exposes generations to the toxic flame retardant chemical to this day.

Public Affairs Institute Director Ed Lorenz will moderate the event 7 p.m., Monday, Nov. 27 inside the Dow Science Center in Room L1.

Proceeds from donations and sales of baked goods and popcorn will help fund the Michigan PBB Registry so that more people can be tested and, if applicable, tracked for long-term health impacts of exposure.

The catastrophe originated at the Michigan Chemical plant in St. Louis, now a Superfund site, when the contaminant was inadvertently substituted for animal feed and distributed to farms throughout Michigan.

For more than a year, research indicates nine million residents consumed contaminated meat and milk before the mistake was discovered.

PBB exposure remains in the body and is medically shown to interfere with the body's hormonal system. For instance, women with high levels of PBB have an increased risk of breast cancer. Men are more likely to have thyroid problems.

So far, around 850 people are included in the PBB registry. But more than 1,000 more want their blood tested.

For more information about PBB exposure, Marcus Cheatham, the health officer for the Mid-Michigan District Health Department, has arranged a community meeting 10 a.m. to noon, Saturday, Dec. 9 at the Ithaca location of the health department, 151 Commerce Drive.

Scientists from the Rollins School of Public Health at Emory University in Georgia will be on hand to explain exposure, health effects and testing. Blood samples will be taken at this event.

Emory’s PBB Research Team has several community events planned around the state. Their aim is to collect information on whether PBB exposure can be identified in children and grandchildren of plant workers, farmers and anyone who was exposed to PBB 40 years ago.

The Ithaca session also will have participants from Alma College and the Pine River Superfund Citizens Task Force.

The task force is a grassroots organization sanctioned by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency as a community advisory group that oversees all the former Gratiot County properties owned by Michigan Chemical that subsequently became the Velsicol Chemical Corporation.

All the sites including the main plant site are under the Superfund program of the EPA.