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Unknown Chemicals Found

(by Albina Sportelli, Editor - January 29, 2009)



Environmental Protection Agency employees pictured removing drums filled with chemicals at the former Abrachem facility on Peekay Drive. The EPA will test the chemicals then ship them out for disposal.

CLIFTON — The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has begun the task of identifying and removing hundreds of chemical-filled drums from the former Abrachem Chemical facility on Peekay Drive. The chemical repackaging business left behind approximately 1,500 drums containing unidentified chemicals stored inside 17, 43-foot-long outdoor storage containers when they left Clifton several months ago, according to the EPA. The company has

relocated to new sites in Belleville and Bridgewater, according to Clifton officials who have already called and alerted officials in those municipalities.

The EPA acquired a judicial warrant to enter the property after having been denied access by Abrachem. EPA officials, equipped with white HAZMAT suits and protective respirator masks, arrived on site on Jan. 26 to begin the identification and removal process, said Paul Kahn, the EPA's on-scene coordinator.

Abrachem operated a bulk chemical repackaging and storage facility on the premises, according to the company's Web site.

On Monday Kahn and his team from the EPA and its contractor Earth Tech, Inc. removed about 300 of the drums from the outside storage containers and transferred them to a secure area inside the building to begin the identifying process. Very few of the drums are labeled, Kahn said, but due to the company's history of not cooperating, he said the EPA "doesn't trust the labels" calling them "unreliable."

The judicial warrant gives the EPA temporary access for four months to complete the task that will most likely take six months according to Kahn. He said when the time comes an extension will be sought either by extending the warrant or through negotiations with the property owner.

The land and building is owned by Clifton 2003, LLC ALS, 86 Maple Ave., in Morristown, said Clifton City Manager Al Greco. Abrachem leased the property until they were forced out for not paying rent, Greco said.

The EPA had attempted to enter the building and the storage containers as early as October 2008 when notified by the N.J. Department of Environmental Protection about chemicals released, Kahn said, adding they were denied access. EPA pursued the matter and referred the case to the U.S. Department of Justice and on Jan. 8, a federal Magistrate issued an access warrant to EPA to perform the removal action, Kahn said. After an initial investigation, the company was found to be improperly storing drums and bulk containers of known and unknown chemicals, Kahn said.

Now that the EPA has access, Kahn said they will need to identify the contents of every drum and ship it out for disposal. When asked if any of the chemicals posed a threat for nearby residents, Kahn said: "With the law of averages, out of 1,500 containers something in there has to be dangerous."

Kahn said he does not know if a criminal investigation is being conducted by the Department of Environmental Protection, but said after all drums have been removed, which is the primary threat, the soil and ground water will be tested.

He said his team is working closely with the Clifton Fire Department which has put a contingency plan in place in case of an "accidental release" or fire.

"We are getting tremendous cooperation from Clifton, especially the Fire Department which has assisted us and maintained a presence here," Kahn said.

Kahn said the property owner, who initially resisted the EPA's efforts, has been cooperating since the judicial warrant was issued.

Greco said he is waiting for the EPA officials to inform the City of the contents of the drums. He said all neighbors were notified through letters that they are not in danger.

In the case of a fire, Greco said the Fire Department will treat it as a hazardous materials fire, adding a plan is in place in case evacuations are needed.

Greco said he and other City officials are "thrilled that they (Abrachem) are out of there," and added that he called Belleville and Bridgewater officials and informed them of Abrachem's history.

Greco said he believes the property owner did not know of the business' practices and has since found damage to the building and property.

According to Abrachem's Web site, the company was formed in 1998 to "provide outsourcing solutions to the chemical, aroma, flavor & fragrance industry." Some of the company's customers, as listed on the Web site, include Aceto Corporation, Bayer Corporation, DuPont, Vopak, Mitsubishi, Honeywell, General Electric and many more. The site lists Tilghman B. Frey as the managing director and chief operating officer and Beverly M. Frey as managing director. Messages seeking comments left on the company's answering machines were not returned. According to perfume-flavorist.com, Abrachem Group recently expanded its operations into Charleston, S.C., "in order to provide its outsourcing services to its customers in the Southeast."

The 2.9 acres of property at 2 Peekay Drive is currently assessed at \$2 million, Greco said.

"We are concerned that maybe there have been environmental crimes at that site," Greco said, adding the County Prosecutor's office and the Attorney General's office have been informed.

Abrachem was on Peekay Drive for six years and also had a separate operation on Clifton Boulevard, but that site was shut down because the property was not suitable for storage of chemicals, Greco said. The building on Clifton Boulevard did not have the proper fire rating, the right sprinkler system for chemicals and the ceiling height was not right.

Greco said the City issued about \$20,000 in fines to Abrachem over the six-year span it was in Clifton for misrepresenting the chemicals stored at its facility. The Fire Department and the HAZMAT team have inspected the property and found the violations, Greco said.

"We believe that starting four months ago when the company was moving toward bankruptcy, they took in lots of products (chemicals) from vendors and just stored it on the premises," Greco said, adding once they left, "they just left the product behind."

Peekay Drive is an industrial park zone, Greco said, but it stands about 200 feet away from Nettie Drive, which is a residential area.

Concerned residents may call the EPA's community involvement coordinator, Melissa Dimas at 212-637-3677 or e-mail her at dimas.melissa@epa.gov.

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