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Flammable liquids found - Attorney general asked to investigate

(by Albina Sportelli, Editor - February 05, 2009)



The New Jersey Attorney General's Office has been asked to investigate Abrachem Chemical and the drums of chemicals left behind on Peekay Drive.

CLIFTON — The New Jersey Attorney General's office has been asked to conduct an investigation into Abrachem Chemical and the hundreds of drums filled with unidentified chemicals it left behind on *Peekay Drive*

Days after touring the facility where about 1,500 chemical-filled unlabeled drums were abandoned, U.S. Rep. Bill Pascrell, Jr. (D-NJ

8th) sent a letter to New Jersey Attorney General Anne Milgram, asking her to "examine the company's action to leave behind thousands of barrels of improperly stored, potentially dangerous chemicals in Clifton for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to remove."

The EPA began the task of identifying and removing hundreds of the drums on Jan. 26. 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.

A press representative from the Attorney General's office said the letter from Pascrell's office was received and "is being reviewed." He said he had no further information at this time.

In his letter, Pascrell wrote: "...it is troubling that while Abrachem works to turn a profit in neighboring communities, the EPA and local first responders are busy cleaning up the mess that Abrachem left behind." The letter also reads that "Abrachem has been a bad tenant, an irresponsible neighbor and an unscrupulous polluter." 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.

One week into the task, Kahn said everything is proceeding according to the original plan and so far 350 of the drums from the outdoor storage containers have been "staged" inside and the chemicals have been tested at the on-site laboratory.

"We are finding that the chemicals are mostly flammable liquids," Kahn said, adding "these are liquids with the ability to burn readily."

Kahn said about 100 of the drums already tested will go back to General Electric (GE) where the chemicals originated. He said GE had contracted with Abrachem in October 2008 to dispose of the chemicals, but when company officials learned of the EPA's involvement they opted to take the chemicals back and dispose of them directly. Khan said the chemicals will be sent to Ohio for disposal at no cost to the government. The EPA has not identified other companies of origin, Kahn said.

Abrachem operated a bulk chemical repackaging and storage facility on the premises, according to the company's Web site. Abrachem officials did not return phone calls seeking comment.

The EPA is working with contractor Earth Tech, Inc. to test and removed the drums.

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.

The 2.9 acres of property at

2 Peekay Drive

is currently assessed at \$2 million, Greco said.

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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