

The Leader

"Pulse of the Meadowlands"

The disaster that could have been

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CLIFTON (March 4, 2009, 1:55 p.m.) — Monday, Feb. 23 was a lucky day for area residents. But most didn't even know it.

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Several barrels of suspicious substances were found at a chemical services company in Clifton, and area emergency management teams — including those in Lyndhurst and Rutherford — braced for the worst.

The substance, which was feared to be highly explosive peroxide, turned out to be something more benign,



Photo by Susan C. Moeller

and tragedy was averted.

The site of Abrachem Chemical in Clifton, near Rutt's Hutt, was the cause of alarm for local police departments, Feb. 23.

But, hundreds more barrels of chemicals remain at the Clifton site, not far from the local landmark Rutt's Hutt. The United States Environmental Protection Agency has declared the location a superfund site, tagging it for immediate removal action.

The site, home of Abrachem Chemical, came to the attention of the EPA in October 2008. A chemical release was discovered at the facility, and the state Department of Environmental Protection asked for assistance from the federal agency, according to Beth Totman, spokeswoman for the EPA.

Officials tried to inspect the Abrachem facility, but they were denied access, according to Totman. So, they sought and were granted an access warrant from the United States Justice Department.

Warrant in hand, EPA workers found 17 individual 43-foot long shipping containers filled with approximately 1,500 barrels of chemicals, Totman continued. The barrels were not appropriately labeled.

"We're not sure what has been stored in these drums," Totman said.

So, the agency began the task of removing the drums one by one, sampling the contents and placing them inside the building. The ultimate goal is to remove them from the site.

"It just reeks of chemicals," Totman said. "We have people in HAZMAT suits every day."

The removal is expected to take four to six months. "It's a cumbersome process," Totman added. "You have to be so careful."

Careful got kicked up a notch on Friday, Feb. 20, when a worker opened a barrel and saw what appeared to be crystals, a property associated with "shock sensitive" or explosive substances, Totman continued.

The Passaic County Bomb Squad was called in to help evaluate the threat, and by Feb. 23, an action plan was ready. Rutherford and Lyndhurst emergency management teams were included in the worst-case scenario planning, Totman indicated.

"It may have affected our residents," said Lyndhurst Police Chief James O'Connor. "We were just there to observe and protect our citizens."

Rutherford Police also confirmed that they were dispatched to the scene.

Workers using robots sampled the chemicals and determined that they were not explosive, Totman said.

Thankfully, the worst-case scenario plans weren't needed. But, approximately 800 barrels

remain at the site.

O'Connor continues to receive updates on progress at the site.

Officials from Abrachem did not return calls before press time. But, according to the company Web site, Abrachem provided numerous chemical-related services, including drum filling, laboratory testing and HAZMAT services.

And, the Web site states, Abrachem provided bar coding, red label storage and controlled substance vaults.

Additionally, Abrachem has racked up significant violations at the DEP.

“It’s a good thing that the EPA is there and has this access warrant,” Totman said. “This has been extremely irresponsible to store chemicals and not label them or mislabel them.”

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