

Toxic Government Report Uncovered

"Public Health Implications of Hazardous Substances in the 26 U.S. Great Lakes Areas of Concern"

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NEW YORK, Feb 8 (OneWorld) – A much-delayed U.S. government report has been obtained by journalists, raising allegations that officials may be suppressing politically inconvenient data that, if released, could help protect the health of millions living in the Great Lakes region of the country.



Toxic waste barrels in Pittsburgh. © drewzhrodague (flickr) A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) study of environmental and health data in eight Great Lakes states was scheduled for publication in July 2007 but it has not yet been made public.

The Center for Public Integrity, a public interest investigative journalism organization, has obtained copies of the report and is raising questions about why despite several years of study and peer review, it was suddenly pulled back for revision — and why its lead author, Christopher De Rosa, was removed from the position he held since 1992.

The study, “Public Health Implications of Hazardous Substances in the Twenty-Six U.S. Great Lakes Areas of Concern,” was developed by the CDC’s Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) at the request of the International Joint Commission, an independent U.S-Canadian organization that monitors and advises both governments on the use and quality of boundary waters.

It brings together two sets of data: environmental data on known “areas of concern” — including superfund sites and hazardous waste dumps — and separate health data collected by county or, in some cases, smaller geographical regions.

The findings pointed to elevated rates of lung, colon, and breast cancer; low birth weight; and infant mortality in several of the geographical areas of concern.

The report does not claim to identify cause and effect. Instead, it outlines areas for further study and data collection on the link between pollution and health.

“What I hope from this report is that communities will say, ‘We deserve to know this information and whether exposure to these chemicals and metals is killing us.’ More work needs to be done.”

-Sheila Kaplan, Center for Public Integrity “Let’s say we have a superfund site and we also find elevated risk of leukemia in the county — is that related? We don’t know, but people living in the area can logically argue that we ought to find out,” Dr. Peter Orris, a professor

at the University of Illinois School of Public Health and one of the peer reviewers of the study, told OneWorld.

Orris is among several of the study's peer reviewers who, along with the International Joint Committee in a December letter to the CDC, have called for the report's publication.

"When you release these [environmental and health] databases together in a way that lets communities look at them, it raises questions that help define the environmental research agenda," Oriss said.

CDC spokesperson Bernadette Burden told OneWorld that the report was held back because internal and external reviewers — including the Environmental Protection Agency and several state health departments — identified "numerous discrepancies and deficiencies" and determined a rigorous review was needed.

Burden cited several examples, including the fact that the county-level health data "reflected people's illnesses from 1988 to 1997, while much of the environmental data used in the report came from the EPA's Toxic Release Inventory dated 2001 and the National Pollutant Discharge Elimination system with 2004 data."

CDC did not clarify why these issues were not identified until July 2007 despite several years of review. A new director of CDC's National Center for Environmental Health and ATSDR, Howard Frumkin, was appointed in July 2007, shortly before the report was due to be released.

Compounding the concerns surrounding the report are recent revelations that CDC failed to address toxins in FEMA trailers provided after Hurricane Katrina. CBS News broke the story after it obtained documents sent from Christopher De Rosa to his superiors at CDC warning that the trailers might be unsafe.

De Rosa also oversaw the Great Lakes report.

De Rosa, who served as director of the Division of Toxicology since 1992, was removed from this position and named special assistant in Frumkin's office — a position that appears to carry "no real responsibilities" according to a Feb. 2008 letter from members of the Congressional Committee on Science and Technologies to CDC director Julie Gerberding. The letter called the move an apparent retaliation.

Toxins and Health Concerns Along the Great Lakes

In 1998, Canada's federal health department produced reports on the overall health of people living in 17 areas of concern in Ontario, documenting elevated hospitalizations for certain diseases and higher rates of cancer and birth defects.



Chicago and Lake Michigan. © Storm Crypt (flickr) In 2001, the International Joint Commission requested that the United States prepare a similar report.

However, only two Great Lakes states, New York and Illinois, collect the type of data necessary to examine the link between health and environmental toxins, according to David Carpenter, director of the Institute for Health and Environment at the University of New York

at Albany School of Public Health and another of the study's peer reviewers.

Carpenter said he hoped the release of the CDC study would raise awareness of the data gaps and inform future research. "In my judgment, it's the best that could be done with the information available," he said.

In two separate reviews, he recommended the study's publication.

"I just don't know why it hasn't been [published]," he said.

As many as 9 million people — including residents of Chicago, Cleveland, Detroit, and Milwaukee — may be at risk from exposure to pollutants including pesticides, dioxin, PCBs (Polychlorinated Biphenyls), and mercury, according to Sheila Kaplan, an investigative journalist who covered the story for the Center for Public Integrity.

Kaplan has read all three drafts of the study, from 2004 to 2007.

"It's important for this work to be followed up on," she told OneWorld. "What I hope from this report is that communities will say, 'We deserve to know this information and whether exposure to these chemicals and metals is killing us.' More work needs to be done."

A Deliberate Suppression?

Canadian biologist Michael Gilbertson, a third peer reviewer, said on the record with the Center for Public Integrity that he felt the findings were being suppressed because they were "inconvenient."

Peter Orris raised concern that the publication may have been halted based on orders outside the CDC.

"I have an overall concern with respect to the culture of this administration, which permeates all levels of the scientific wing of the government," Orris told OneWorld. "The administration has regularly cut funds so that they don't find statistics that could be potentially politically embarrassing — for instance, the sampling of toxins in fish in the Great Lakes has been cut way back."

"If the messenger doesn't come with the message, no one knows it's there," he added.

According to Burden, the CDC plans to release the report after the review is completed, in "weeks rather than months." She could not comment about Christopher De Rosa or other personnel matters.

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