

Chemicals found buried in Ulster

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SHAWANGUNK — State authorities are overseeing the investigation of chemicals and debris that were found buried at Watchtower Farms.

The state Department of Environmental Conservation said the pollution was found at three different sites on the 1,141-acre property. Each of the pollution sites covers roughly 2 acres.

Matt Hubicki, a DEC environmental engineer, said hints of the contamination were found in 2007 while the Jehovah's Witnesses organization was building an expansion.

"They found some drums while digging the foundation for one of their residential facilities," Hubicki said. The group immediately reported the drums to the DEC.

An investigation found that several 55-gallon drums contained chemicals, including inks and solvents that were used at Watchtower's printing press off Red Mills Road. The gigantic printing operation dates back to the 1970s, and it produces all the religious literature the group distributes in North America.

The drums contained benzene, xylene and other chemicals that have been shown to affect human health. Construction debris and polluted soil was also uncovered at the sites.

DEC officials said it appears that Watchtower workers moved the toxic soil to these sites when printing chemicals spilled decades ago. Then they used farm machinery to aerate the soil and evaporate the contaminants.

An investigation that began this month will determine the scope of the pollution and clean-up options. Watchtower will have to pay for the cleanup; the cost has not yet been determined. The site is currently enrolled in the state Brownfield Cleanup Program.

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