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Feds clean up Aniwa arsenic dump

A promotional graphic for the 27th Annual Shawano Folk Music Festival. It features a bird logo on the left, the text '27th ANNUAL SHAWANO Folk Music FESTIVAL', and the dates 'AUG. 7-9, 2015'. The location is 'Mielke Park & Mielke Arts Center, Shawano, WI'. Logos for 'WOLF RIVER MEDIA LLC Proud Sponsor' and 'crafts' are also present. On the right, it says 'SING DANCE PLAY!' with decorative icons.

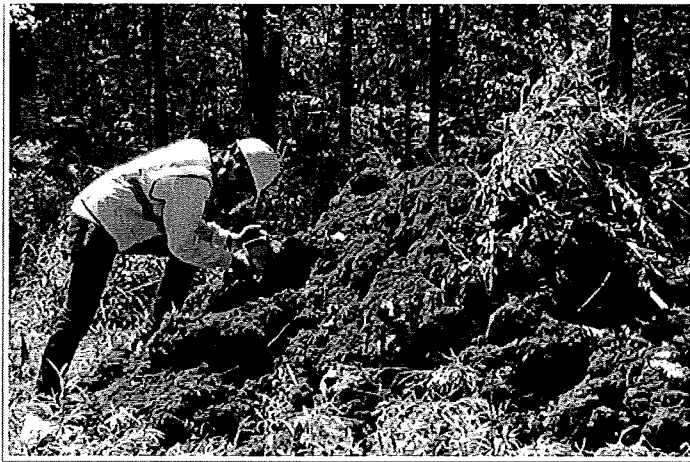
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Submitted by admin on Tue, 07/28/2015 - 23:23

Farmers shared pesticide depot in the '30s

By: Scott Williams, swilliams@wolfrivermedia.com (mailto:swilliams@wolfrivermedia.com)





Contributed Photo Rob Kondreck, a federal contract worker, tests excavated soil to measure arsenic levels at the site of last month's cleanup in western Shawano County.



Contributed Photo Crews for the U.S Environmental Protection Agency are shown in the town of Aniwa last month excavating and removing more than 1,000 tons of contaminated soil from an old arsenic depot site.

It was a relic from a time when Shawano County farmers used molasses laced with arsenic to keep hungry grasshoppers and other pests off their crops.

Fifty years later, the abandoned pesticide depot along Marsh Road became a toxic dump that local officials recognized as a health hazard — but one that they could not afford to clean up.

That is why the federal government intervened and spent about \$300,000 hauling away the last tainted remnants of the old dump on the western edge of Shawano County.

Public health officials are breathing a sigh of relief that the cleanup conducted last month has finally addressed the danger from arsenic contamination that was threatening local drinking water supplies.

"It was definitely an important issue," said Jaime Bodden, director of the Shawano-Menominee Counties Health Department.

Describing the 4-acre depot property as a holdover from bygone days of relaxed attitudes toward protecting the environment, Bodden added: "We're feeling the effects today."

Situated halfway between the villages of Birnamwood and Aniwa, the depot opened in the 1930s with a simple wooden shed and dirt floor. Town officials operated the facility and distributed arsenic to farmers who needed the pesticide to protect their crops.

When the federal government banned household use of arsenic because of health hazards in the late '60s, town officials dug a 10-foot-deep pit and buried their remaining toxic inventory right there. Federal officials believe some of the abandoned arsenic had been stored at concentrations as high as 90 percent pure.

Aniwa Town Chairman Dan Lex said although his town owned and operated the depot, it was a regional operation that served farmers in many surrounding towns and villages.

"We ended up being the dumping site," he said.

In the early '80s, the state Department of Natural Resources attempted a cleanup at the site, excavating and removing several buried drums of arsenic. The state then left town officials to monitor the site for any remaining traces of contamination.

An adjacent abandoned railroad track also was converted into the Wiouwash Trail, a state recreational resource used by area residents for hiking, horseback riding and cross-country skiing.

When tests showed that arsenic contamination remained at the old depot property, town officials erected a fence warning pedestrians to stay away. With signs that the contaminants had reached groundwater supplies, officials also began searching for a source of funding to conduct another cleanup.

"We contacted just about everybody we knew of," Lex said.

State officials last year reached out to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for help, citing a lack of resources in Wisconsin to deal with the situation. The federal agency examined the site and found elevated levels of arsenic, as well as evidence that groundwater contamination was spreading toward nearby homes served by wells.

According to an EPA memo drafted in February, federal officials approved a "time-critical removal action" based on the determination that the Shawano County pesticide dump represented "an imminent and substantial threat" to public health and the environment.

Kathy Halbur, the EPA's on-scene coordinator, called it uncommon to find a property requiring such remediation more than 40 years after arsenic was banned for household use.

Cleanup crews arrived at the site in early June and spent about three weeks hauling away more than 1,000 tons of contaminated soil. The soil was treated to neutralize the contamination, and then dumped in a landfill in Calumet County.

Halbur said officials are optimistic that they removed all of the arsenic and that groundwater quality in the area will begin to return to normal.

"We got as much as we could," she said.

The property was refilled with clean material, and federal officials plan to continue monitoring the area for signs of contamination.

Lex said town officials have no idea what they might try to do with the property in the future.

Bodden said county health officials are pleased that EPA administrators acted so quickly to protect public health and safety in that area of Shawano County.

"They took it very seriously," she said. "I definitely feel assured that they did a really good job."

ONLINE

To read more of the federal government's report on Shawano County's arsenic site, go to epaos.org/aniwass.

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