

ENVIRONMENT

NJ announces possible settlement over Toms River's former Ciba-Geigy chemical site

3-minute read.



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Published 5:07 a.m. ET Dec. 6, 2022 | Updated 10:57 a.m. ET Dec. 6, 2022

TOMS RIVER — One of New Jersey's most infamous pollution sites, one associated with a cluster of childhood cancers in the 1990s, will be protected and turned into a 1,000-acre park, according to a proposed agreement announced Monday by the state Department of Environmental Protection.

The BASF Corporation, which owns the site formerly owned by the Ciba-Geigy Corp., agreed to restore most of the property to a natural state and break ground on the future 1,000-acre park in 2023, according to the DEP.

The proposed park would have restored freshwater wetlands, created upland grasslands, pollinator habitats, public access trails, boardwalks for wildlife viewing and an environmental center, according to the state agency.

"It is a step in the right direction for the people who have been suffering from the contamination of The Ciba-Geigy Superfund Site for decades," said Taylor McFarland, conservation manager for the New Jersey chapter of the Sierra Club, an environmental organization.

The 1,350-acre site was the home of the Toms River Chemical Co. plant which manufactured dyes and resins beginning in the early 1950s. Under the later ownership of Ciba-Geigy, employees illegally dumped chemicals throughout the property. Toxins leached into the groundwater from a variety of plant locations, including from a storage area containing 35,000 chemical drums and a 12-acre area containing wastewater and plant sludge, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

In 1982, the property was added to the federal Superfund registry and took oversight of the cleanup effort, according to the EPA.

In 1995, New Jersey Department of Health and the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry began examining the rate of childhood cancers in Toms River and the potential relationship to contamination in the drinking water. The state health department determined there was, in fact, a statistically significant elevation in childhood cancers in the township.

Since acquiring the site, BASF has continued groundwater treatment operations to remove pollution, which first began in 1992. The removal of chemical drums and toxic soil was finished in 2010.

DEP officials will accept public comment on the proposed park agreement with BASF over the next 30 days.

More: Toms River Ciba-Geigy Superfund site will take decades to clean

"Having spent my childhood on the other side of the fence from this polluted site, I know what this settlement will mean to the families and children of those neighborhoods," Deputy DEP Commissioner Sean D. Moriarty, who oversees the DEP team that developed the settlement, said in a news release. "I am proud to have played a small part in transforming a previously forbidden place into somewhere the community can truly connect with nature and appreciate its immense value to health and wellbeing."

But some environmentalists expressed dissatisfaction with the proposed deal.

Janet Tauro, New Jersey chairwoman of the environmental advocacy group Clean Water Action, said the public should be entitled to a public hearing on the agreement because pollution remains on the site. She called the previous actions of the Ciba-Geigy Corp. an "abomination."

BASF will continue site remediation, which includes excavating and capping contaminated areas and pumping and treating groundwater, despite the agreement, according to the DEP.

Jeff Tittel, an environmental activist and former director of the New Jersey chapter of the Sierra Club, said the settlement should include compensation for the damage and harm caused by the chemical contamination.

"It's a sellout," he said. "The state shouldn't be in control of a contaminated site."

Details of the settlement are online at the DEP's Office of Natural Resource Restoration.

Related Toms River must borrow \$13M after losing \$17.3M BASF Ciba-Geigy tax case

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