

6-6-2019

The PFOA Crisis in Hoosick Falls, NY

Grace Snyder

Union College - Schenectady, NY, snyderg@union.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalworks.union.edu/eco228_2019

Recommended Citation

Snyder, Grace, "The PFOA Crisis in Hoosick Falls, NY" (2019). *2019 Op-Eds*. 10.
https://digitalworks.union.edu/eco228_2019/10

This Book is brought to you for free and open access by the Environmental and Natural Resource Economics (ECO 228) at Union | Digital Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in 2019 Op-Eds by an authorized administrator of Union | Digital Works. For more information, please contact digitalworks@union.edu.

Grace Snyder
Professor McCarty
Economics of Natural Resources
6 June 2019

The PFOA Crisis in Hoosick Falls, NY

Would you drink water that's poisoned? This sounds like a silly question of course, but to the residents of Hoosick Falls, NY not so much. After the death of Michael Hickey's father, he knew something was wrong in the small rural town. His father died of kidney cancer, which was unusual, as he was a healthy 68 year old man who did not drink or smoke. His dad's death was among the many unexpected cancer related deaths in the town. After doing a simple google search, Hickey discovered a relationship between a chemical called PFOA (perfluorooctanoic acid) and kidney cancer. Hickey's father worked in a local factory called Saint Gobain (originally owned by Honeywell), where he produced Teflon products. One of the main chemicals in teflon happened to be PFOA. A coincidence? Hickey didn't think so. After deciding to test his own water along with his father's, the results confirmed his theory. All of the water he tested had PFOA levels well above the EPA's recommended 400 ppt. To make matters worse, Hickey's father's house was on the same street as the Saint Gobain factory.

Hickey started to work hard to raise community awareness on the high levels of PFOA in hopes to mitigate the problem. How long had the town been drinking PFOA contaminated water? Over time, the EPA became involved. The EPA worked alongside the state health department and soon realized there was serious danger to the residents who had been drinking the water. However, it took them over a year to advise the public not to drink, shower, or cook with the contaminated water. Residents were infuriated by this. How could these agencies keep such important information from them? The lives of thousands were in danger, yet the EPA chose to keep vital information to themselves. This was a major issue, as the EPA was more worried about its reputation than addressing the problem. Because of the past actions the EPA has taken, people have begun to lose trust in the judgement of the agency.

One of the most striking facts regarding this incident is that PFOA was never regulated by the EPA to begin with. PFOA is among the list of about 80,000 other chemicals approved in the US that are not regulated by the EPA. Instead, the EPA uses the Unregulated Contaminant Monitoring Rule (UCMR) to try and grasp the effects of unregulated contaminants in drinking water. However, the EPA only allows water systems that supply drinking water to over 10,000 people to be tested for unregulated emerging contaminants. This means that municipal water systems in towns like Hoosick Falls (population of 3,500) never get tested for unregulated contaminants due to this law. The only reason PFOA was discovered in Hoosick Falls is because

Michael Hickey took action and made a change. If it wasn't for him, residents would not have been aware of this issue and would still be drinking the contaminated water.

Regarding the teflon industry, the demand for teflon made products will experience a substantial decline in demand. Once people realized the dangers of using teflon pots and pans, many will stop cooking with them and look for substitutes, such as aluminum. Although this may not have a huge impact on the industry right away, it might have enough of an impact to at least raise awareness of the dangers of teflon and PFOA.

The EPA must change their laws regarding unregulated contaminants. Why is it that 2.4 million Americans do not benefit from the UCMR program? Water is a right, not a privilege, so why are there so many people who find themselves without this right? The PFOA crisis is only one example of such disasters. Instead of only testing water systems that serve 10,000 residents or more, the EPA should test all public water systems. I encourage those who are reading this to help Hickey and I make a change to see the EPA test all public water systems.

Instead of the EPA spending so much money on superfund sites, they need to spend more on preventative measures. If they were to do this, the EPA would actually save money, as they would not have to worry about spending so much to clean up outbreaks like the one in Hoosick Falls. It would cost them more to spend millions on superfund sites that may never even result in a full cleanup. Instead, they should put more money into the UCMR program. By doing this, it would be more likely that there would be less incidents of such drastic contamination.

It should not take a situation such as the PFOA crisis in Hoosick Falls to realize there needs to be a change in how the EPA regulates contaminants. Raising awareness like Hickey did is one small step in hopes of safer drinking water, but more can be done. The EPA must change its laws regarding the UCMR program if we want to see real changes.

Works Cited

“Learn About the Unregulated Contaminant Monitoring Rule.” *EPA*, Environmental Protection Agency, 24 Jan. 2018,
www.epa.gov/dwucmr/learn-about-unregulated-contaminant-monitoring-rule.

Schlanger, Zoe. “This Guy Googled 'Teflon' When His Dad Died. Now His Town's a Toxic Water Contamination Site.” *Project Earth*, Project Earth, 19 Oct. 2017,
projectearth.us/this-guy-googled-teflon-when-his-dad-died-now-his-town-1796423036