

Anti-UConn eco-activists are again raising concerns about UConn's 90-day hazardous waste storage facility. UConn is considering either upgrading the facility at its current location or moving it and thus provided the public with an open house. Mike Westerfield there stated that if an accident happened, "It could represent a major public health hazard" by contaminating the drinking water provided by the Windham Water Works (WWW).

Having served for 10 years as a member of the Windham Water Commission (WWC) that oversees the WWW and having investigated potential threats within the watershed, I entirely disagree with Mr. Westerfield's alarmism. Because UConn runs a very safe and professional facility, has never had a spill, has bermed impervious floors, has various alarms to allow them to respond should a spill ever occur and additionally ships out nearly all wastes within 4 to 6 weeks so that only small amounts are ever on site - even in a 'worst case scenario' the WWW reservoir will never be threatened by a spill there.

While Chronicle readers focus on UConn's potential impact to our drinking water, actual threats go ignored. Thousands of homeowners who live in the same watershed yet far closer to the WWW reservoir regularly use chemicals that are as noxious as nearly anything at the UConn facility. Pesticides, gasoline, oil, solvents, fertilizers and heavy metals are all found in the garages, basements and sheds of most homes. Unfortunately homeowners have little training in properly disposing of these chemicals while UConn's hazmat facility professionals have extensive skills and training.

Local homeowners are supposed to dispose of their unused hazardous wastes at the public hazmat in Willington, off Ruby Road, every other Saturday - but the staff there told me that only a small percentage actually do this. Where are these hazardous wastes being disposed of then? In a survey of high school students I learned that approximately 1 in 3 students lived in a home where one or more family members improperly dumped hazardous chemicals or where there was clear evidence of a hazardous waste spill in their back yards (oil or gas stains on the ground). No wonder soluble hazardous chemicals now show up in so many residential wells. Your neighbor pouring old gas on the ground in his back yard a year ago or that jug of septic degreaser you poured down your toilet 20 years ago are likely sources of MTBE or TCE should they appear in your well water.

How about the homeowners who dispose of their spent rechargeable batteries by throwing them in the trash? Trash is incinerated which causes some of the heavy metals in rechargeable batteries to exit through the smokestack - some of which then falls back to earth via dry or wet precipitation. How about the Midwestern coal burning power plants that use coal laced with mercury and cadmium and which descends on Connecticut in high enough amounts that deer livers and many fish are placed under limited consumption advisories by our D.E.P.? Seems odd that the institution which has trained many of the scientists, educators and public officials who are confronting this real threat should be made a local 'boogie man' for a facility that has done a perfect job of making sure that toxic wastes from UConn are properly and safely disposed of.

The one chemical showing up in the WWW reservoir that is significantly above the natural 'background' rate is sodium chloride. This is salt, one of many common household chemicals temporarily stored at UConn's hazmat facility. Town and state highway crews annually dump tons of it on roads throughout the WWW watershed in winter. It has been implicated in the contamination of numerous wells and research clearly shows negative impacts on freshwater stream organisms as well as on human health. Where is the alarm?

Does anyone even talk about former landfills that sit immediately adjacent to the WWW distribution (Willimantic Reservoir) and storage (Mansfield Hollow Lake) reservoirs? Iron laden leachate regularly seeps from both sites. I believe the WWW does a good job monitoring these 'threats' and there is no evidence showing they have negatively impacted our drinking water in any degree (I drink the water from the WWW with complete confidence) – but there is not a shred of evidence that even hints that any leachate, harmless or dangerous has ever found its way into the WWW reservoirs from UConn which is 10 miles upstream. (The Chronicle has now stated twice that the UConn facility is 7 miles from the WWW reservoir. But since water does not travel "as the crow flies", instead flowing downhill following existing stream channels, the Chronicle would be more accurate in quoting a distance of 10 miles. But even if it were only half a mile I would still say the threat is insignificant.)

Another way to put it in context, a farmer within half a mile of the WWW reservoir dumped on the ground over 5 tons per acre of fertilizers, herbicides and pesticides so as to be able to harvest his crop. But if a worker at the UConn hazmat facility accidentally dropped a gallon of any one of these chemicals outside their building it would constitute a hazardous waste spill (even though it would be immediately cleaned up) and might make headlines given the eco-activists propensity for dramatizing things that happen at UConn.

I'm tired of having UConn so often portrayed as a bad neighbor by the same people who have knowingly misled Chronicle readers in the past. The two 'organizations' that continue to smear UConn's name are Citizens For Responsible Growth (CFRG) and the Naubesatuck Watershed Council (NWC). Both provided quotes in the Nov. 21<sup>st</sup> Chronicle. Yet it was NWC folk who earlier twisted data concerning normal background radiation in Connecticut's waters and tried to imply it was UConn's fault as well as made numerous false statements such as that the hazmat facility had not gotten proper permits and was exempt from regulations (see <http://www.state.nv.us/nucwaste/news2000/nn10909.htm>). Both 'organizations' have selective memberships and closed meetings. Since Freedom of Information (FOI) rules do not apply to them, they are free to hide their biases from the public. I am limited to responding to their statements carried in the Chronicle. In doing so and following the exposure of numerous of their untruths via exchanges of letters to the editor in which they were unable to rebut my statements - they responded with malicious letters to my employer in an attempt to harm and silence me. Yet they claim UConn is a bully and not open to the public?

UConn, the WWW and WWC are all bound by FOI regulations and all allow for full public input. Every time I have ever attempted to tour a UConn facility (three times at the hazmat facility – once unannounced) or get help from staff or administrators there I have been treated professionally and honestly. And every time I have attempted to attend meetings of CFRG or NWC (or have asked members in leadership positions polite questions) I have been thrown out, denied, threatened, ignored or mocked. I am dismayed that these latter voices continue to be given substantial press when it comes to debates concerning local environmental factors affecting our drinking water.

The truth is that UConn is a terrific neighbor and does not deserve most of the bad environmental press it has so often received these last several years. The Chronicle ought to have UConn's director of environmental policy Richard Miller write a weekly column in which he is allowed to present accurate and helpful information on local environmental issues. UConn professor Paul Stake does the very same thing with gardening and landscaping information. Additionally the Chronicle ought to make it a policy of contacting the WWC chairman Mike Callahan for his response to any issue regarding impacts to Willimantic's drinking water. Under Mr. Callahan's wise leadership (as well as the excellent WWW staff) the water quality of Willimantic drinking water went from being a local joke to a now widely recognized 'best in Connecticut' product. Chronicle readers would be much better served than to have biased activists, most of whom know very little about hydrology, engineering or environmental science, carry such weight on drinking water issues.

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