

# Ohio School District Rejects Energy Dept. Directive to Reopen Contaminated Middle School

By Kelly Lundeen

The Zahn's Corner Middle School website announced: "Grades 4 and 5 will be located at Jasper Elementary School for the 2019-2020 school year" and "Grade 6 will be located at Piketon High School for the 2019-2020 school year."

This fall, the middle school's 300 children, mostly between the ages of eight and eleven, will not have to be unknowingly exposed to disputed levels of radioactivity in order to attend class.

The *Columbus Dispatch* reported Sept. 13 that: "cancer-causing toxins including plutonium, neptunium, americium and uranium were detected on the property, and officials say the toxins are likely from the US Department of Energy's decommissioning and disposal of radioactive materials from the former Portsmouth Gas Diffusion Plant about 3 miles from the school."

The area school board officially quarantined the school site in September with the superintendent, Wes Hairston reported to have said, "No student should ever be unnecessarily exposed to dangerous chemicals or toxins. (DOE officials) like to use the words 'trace amounts.' Well, maybe that's accurate. If that's your child, would you want your child exposed to those things?"

The Piketon, Ohio school was closed May 14, 2018, after an independent study reported radioactive contamination that month, followed by the US Department of Energy's (DOE's) admission that it had detected the presence in the school of—but had not informed the public about—radioactive americium in 2018, and neptunium-237 in 2017 (See Summer 2019 *Nukewatch Quarterly* cover story). The middle school is 3 miles from the giant Portsmouth uranium processing factory, which did uranium enrichment for nuclear weapons and reactor fuel for 47 years. Closed in 2001, the factory is being demolished by the DOE. Its 10 million square feet of floor space made it one of the largest industrial facilities in the world.

In May, additional studies were planned in order to "determine the source, levels, extent, and most importantly, the risk to human health related to the offsite contamination," stated a Pike County Health District press release. In July, the DOE and independent researcher Michael Ketterer—the Northern

Arizona University professor emeritus of chemistry and biochemistry who originally alerted the community to the contamination—reported conflicting results from samples taken at the school.

The DOE's Portsmouth Environmental Monitoring website says, "Results from sample analyses conducted by experts at Savannah River National Laboratory show no radioactivity detected above naturally occurring levels, and no cause for public health concern. There is no public health or safety risk from radioactive material preventing Zahn's Corner Middle School from opening this fall."

Ketterer on the other hand duplicated his earlier findings of enriched uranium contamination. When he was asked about discrepancies, he explained that he had detected uranium contamination in the blank filters used to collect samples. "I was thinking when I saw that, 'Why would [the DOE] choose this medium because it's contaminated?'" the *Columbus*



**"I have a creek that runs through my property, and we have spent much time fishing and swimming in it. Does that mean my daughters [pictured] are going to possibly have reproductive issues? I think that's a valid question at this point," said Penny Beckwith-Carter, of Piketon, Ohio, who took the photo.**

*Dispatch* reported. In a public meeting at Piketon High School August 10, Ketterer said that the DOE agreed, "with the findings that non-fallout (uranium, neptunium and plutonium) are present in some samples, and the elemental and isotopic signatures of those materials are consistent with (uranium) from [Portsmouth's enrichment process]," the *Portsmouth Daily Times* reported. Ketterer also revealed that the samples he took outside of the school indicated the presence of neptunium in the Little Beaver River that feeds the Scioto River, a primary source of drinking water for south and central Ohio.

To help resolve the issue, the DOE is funding a third study by Solutient Technologies, a firm chosen by the Pike County General Health District. After the conclusion of the study currently underway, the local school board will decide the fate of the Middle School.

Not surprisingly, area residents have been in an uproar following the disclosure of radioactive contamination in the school. At least two class action lawsuits and a cancer cluster study have been launched. The Pike County General Health District is seeking assistance from the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention for the cancer cluster study. "There has always been speculation that the cancer rates are higher in people that live near the plant, but there has never been a scientific study to show that correlation," said Matt Brewster, a Pike County Health commissioner. Ohio Department of Health records show that Pike County has the fifth highest rate of cancer in the state. Over the last five years, elected officials have reported five students contracting cancer while attending local schools.

Cathy Eick is a former staff member at Zahn's Corner Middle School and a parent of two children who attended the school. "My kids have had friends that have either passed away or they've watched them fight cancer and it's just not acceptable, especially when you hear the reports that they find something in your school that can make your child sick," Eick told the *Columbus Dispatch* at a protest outside of a DOE event in May.

—*Columbus Dispatch*, Sept. 13, July 25, & May 12; *Portsmouth Daily Times*, Aug. 12; *Cincinnati Enquirer*, June 5 & May 14; WOSU Public Radio, May 15; Pike County General Health District, May 14; Ohio Department of Health, Jan. 18, 2019.

## Fukushima Waste Water Crisis Raising Alarms

Japan's environment minister Yoshiaki Harada said Sept. 10 that the operator of the ruined Fukushima Daiichi nuclear reactors will have to dump huge quantities of radiation-laden waste water directly into the Pacific Ocean—a threat that has enraged local fishermen and nearby countries that share Pacific Ocean-front territory.

Over 1 million cubic meters (or tons) of contaminated water has accumulated at the site since it was struck in March 2011 by the strongest earthquake in Japan's history and the subsequent tsunami that triggered three reactor meltdowns and forced 164,865 residents to flee their homes.

"The only option will be to drain it into the sea and dilute it," Harada told a Sept. 9 news briefing in Tokyo, the *Guardian* reported. "There are no other options," he said. This claim is false, as there are at least four alternatives to ocean dumping including long-term storage.

Reactor owner Tokyo Electric Power Co. (Tepco) has repeatedly claimed that its filter system removes all the radioactivity from the waste water except tritium. But last year Tepco admitted that its enormous filter system had failed, and that water in the tanks still contains highly radioactive contaminants including radioactive cesium, cobalt, antimony, iodine, strontium, and tritium. The level of contamination in the stored water far exceeds legal limits allowing release into the ocean, and Tepco has promised to refilter the water, a process that will take 5-to-6 years.

Moreover, Greenpeace reports\* that the water processing failure was known by Tepco from the beginning of its operation. The company kept the information secret for the five years between 2013 and

2018 because public disclosure would have ruined Tepco's plans "to solve the enormous water crisis by discharge to the Pacific Ocean."

Held in 1,000 huge tanks at the site, each with 1,000-1,200 tons of radioactive liquid, Tepco has said that it will run out of on-site space for more tanks by the summer of 2022. The amount of processed water increases between 2,000 and 4,000 tons each week. Dr. Gordon Edwards notes that, "In the next 4-5 years, another 750,000 tons will be added to the inventory."

According to critics, Japan's government and Tepco repeatedly suggest the idea of dumping the waste water into the Pacific in order to weaken resistance to the plan and to foster its acceptance among skeptics.

### Japan's Neighbors Complain

The governments of South Korea and Taiwan have formally objected to any ocean dumping of Fukushima waste water, warning that currents will bring the contamination to their own shores.

In addition, South Korea's Olympic committee has raised concerns about the risk to Olympic athletes who will attend the 2020 summer games in Tokyo. With baseball and softball games set to be played in Fukushima City, South Korea's committee asked in August whether food served in the Athletes' Village could be contaminated with radioactive fallout that was widely dispersed by the wrecked reactors. Japan's Olympic Committee replied by down playing the concerns.

South Korea should restrict imports of processed foods from Japan's Fukushima region as radiation has been found in shipments, an opposition lawmaker said Aug. 19, *Korea Times* reports. Citing

data from the Ministry of Food and Drug Safety, South Korean Rep. Kim Kwang-soo of the Party for Democracy and Peace has reported that radiation was discovered in almost 17 tons of processed foods imported from the eight prefectures, or 35 shipments, over the past five years. South Korea banned seafood imports from states or prefectures near Fukushima in 2013 over reports of radioactive contamination. But no import restrictions have been put on processed foods from the areas. —*JL*

—*Guardian*, Sept. 10; *Asia Times*, Sept. 25; NHK Japan Public TV, Aug. 21; *Korea Times*, Aug. 19; *Seattle Times*, Sept. 28, 2018.

\* "Tepco Water Crises," Greenpeace Germany, Jan. 22, 2019, can be accessed here: [https://storage.googleapis.com/planet4-japan-stateless/2019/06/eef0f147-tepco\\_water\\_crisis.pdf](https://storage.googleapis.com/planet4-japan-stateless/2019/06/eef0f147-tepco_water_crisis.pdf)

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