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He's not trusting toxin testing

Lawrence County man still concerned about PFC health risks

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Lawrence County resident Jerry Hamilton, 61, does not trust the government officials who are testing for toxins from Decatur Utilities, and he focuses on two statements to explain.

The first came from U.S. Department of Agriculture official Kerry Dearfield, who spoke at two public meetings in Moulton.

USDA slaughtered several cows in Lawrence County and took blood and tissue samples. The tissue samples came from the meat, as well as from organs like the kidneys and liver. Dearfield spoke at length about the expense USDA incurred in testing the samples, which he said indicated no health risk for beef consumers.

In a meeting with *The Daily* before his public presentation, however, he said the agency did not test the sampled livers or kidneys for perfluorinated chemicals.

"That's why I don't trust them," Hamilton said. "It's my understanding the (PFCs) go to body organs. If they don't test those organs, they won't find the (PFCs)."

Numerous animal studies have shown the chemicals accumulate in the liver and kidneys.

Dearfield told *The Daily* this month he did not test the organs because, "Our studies suggest people don't eat kidney and liver like they used to."

He gave no explanation for why the agency took samples, but then declined to test them.

"That's the way to change the truth a little," Hamilton said. "That's what I think they are doing. Don't test a little piece of meat and say it's not there. Well of course it's not there. It's somewhere else."

The second statement that led to Hamilton's mistrust came from Dr. Neal Sass of the Alabama Department of Public Health. Sass said no tests conclusively show PFCs to be harmful to humans. He said he does not believe they are harmful to humans. He discounts numerous studies showing they are carcinogenic in animals, cause sterility and birth defects in animals.



Daily photo by John Godbey

Jerry Hamilton used to love having a creek behind his Moulton home just off Alabama 33. He used to catch fish from the creek but has stopped because of fears the creek is polluted.

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He also places no weight on studies showing similar affects on humans, noting other studies show the opposite.

“He’s saying, since we don’t have any evidence, that it’s harmful to the body, that means it’s not harmful,” Hamilton complained. “That’s about the dumbest thing he could say. Why doesn’t he just say, ‘I don’t know.’ You have kids growing up around here. Twenty years from now, they will wind up with health defects and guys like this doctor are going to be gone.”

Hamilton also worries that the same Decatur industries that caused the contamination are coordinating much of the testing.

Hamilton is particularly concerned because his property is along a creek that receives discharges from the Moulton wastewater treatment plant. The plant accepts contaminated leachate from the Hillsboro landfill. The landfill accepts sludge from Decatur industries. Hamilton, who used to fish in the creek, put away his fishing pole when he began reading about the contamination.

Lawrence County’s problems began 12 years ago, although residents first learned of them early this year.

The Decatur Utilities wastewater treatment plant accumulates large amounts of sludge before discharging treated water into the Tennessee River. As an inexpensive disposal method, it has for 12 years offered the biosolids as free fertilizer for area farmers.

Synagro South LLC applied the sludge to the farmland, which complied with Environmental Protection Agency regulations.

Although EPA knew the chemicals were potentially harmful and knew that several Decatur industries used them in production, an agency official said this month it did not realize Decatur was disposing of the sludge on farmland.

When Daikin America reported the release of a large amount of the chemicals in 2008, EPA investigated. It found alarming levels in sludge-applied soil, most in Lawrence County. DU immediately discontinued the fertilizer program.

Later testing showed high levels in industrial discharge, in DU sludge and in landfills that receive the sludge, at the Moulton wastewater treatment plant and in private wells and ponds near sludge application points.

PFCs are synthetic chemicals that do not degrade in the environment. They are used to produce many non-stick products, like Teflon, and are in fire-suppression foams. Some of the chemicals remain in the human body for years, meaning levels keep rising if there is constant exposure.

“People here are scared,” said Hamilton. “They don’t know what to believe. They’re scared for their kids and their grandkids. They’re scared about property values. They’re worried about whether they should eat the fish, eat the beef.

“I think they could accept the truth, but they don’t feel they are getting it. They hear, ‘Everything’s fine,’ but they wonder what they will hear in 10 years after someone independent does some testing.”