

# The consequences of indifference

Last week, the DEQ and members of the public met to discuss the progression of an enormous groundwater contamination site that is polluting drinking water with TCE and that some fear will come down and impact the Chain of Lakes area. The affected region covers more than 5,100 acres and is one of the largest of its kind in the United States.

The bad news is that, besides closely monitoring its progress and supplying the public with clean drinking water, not much can be done about this bad case of underground pollution. And not only is this TCE plume migrating, it is getting stronger and worse all the time.

The first obvious question to those learning about the issue is, who did this? Why did they do it?

The truth is it wasn't uncommon for people to dump things out the back door of a manufacturing plant or factory fifty or sixty years ago when this contamination began. That was the way to get rid of it. There simply wasn't awareness or knowledge of the short or long-term effects of pitching something on the ground and other disposal options weren't encouraged. People weren't looking ahead and didn't see the consequences of their actions.

Well, the consequences were bad. The topography in this area consists of a lot of sand and gravel and little organic material to break down the chemical TCE. Today's consequence is that people don't have clean drinking water from wells. The consequences to come are still unclear.

What's done is done. There's no need for blame or punishment, but there is a lesson here. There has been a significant amount of scientific progress and a clear increase in environmental awareness in the last few decades. At the government level, restrictions on disposal and emissions drive the way things are built and the way businesses run.

But the awareness of consequences has to happen on a personal level. We can't wait until things get to a crisis point, because, like in this case in Antrim County, sometimes there is no solution. Sometimes the damage is too far in.

There's a plastic island in the Pacific Ocean that is twice the size of Texas. Plastic goes nowhere — it does not decompose. Instead, it may end up in this plastic pit in the ocean, or perhaps in a landfill or anywhere else, hidden for now, not right in front of our eyes. If we continue at the rate we are using plastic, there will be a problem down the road. That's one example of the potential damage of not having foresight.

We have an opportunity to see something in front of us that is the consequence of not looking ahead. Let's use this hindsight to have the foresight to act now and not have future generations in public meetings about how to deal with what happened 50 years ago. Let's act now to ensure clean air and safe drinking water and space to roam and recreate for our children and grandchildren.