

St. Louis, Michigan would be a very pleasant small town in the middle of the state. However, the presence of a river that could be considered a toxic chemical dump in the center of town destroys all of the ambiance. The site of the former plant is lovely as you drive by on the highway. When you stop to take advantage of this pleasant park-like area, you discover it is surrounded by a chain link fence with some rather horrific warnings about the land inside. The river is peaceful and calm as it drifts through town. It is not apparent that it is a place in which one would not wish to swim or fish.

The impact of the former Velsicol plant on the community is tremendous, ranging from the total ban of fishing in the river eliminating that form of recreational use (who would want to eat a fish, let alone even catch and release one, with a visible tumor on its body?) to businesses closing because of the fishing ban (who will buy bait and tackle when you cannot fish?). Long-time residents will stick with the community because it is their home. New residents in the area are very hesitant about settling in the community because of concerns about the toxic materials in the river in their backyard. While the worst of the contamination is being removed, new and old analytical data shows the presence of toxic chemicals at levels of concern well outside the cleanup area, both upstream and downstream. Although the chemicals of concern, DDT and PBB, are not particularly soluble in water, they are present in the sediments underlying the water, and are easily moved into the water column through activities such as swimming. This concern removes the use of the river in any way beyond boating (as long as you do not fall in).

The current EPA-funded Superfund cleanup will go a long way toward correcting these problems, but there will always remain concern because of the presence of the toxic chemicals in the portions of the river not cleaned up. To bring St. Louis back into being as a viable community in small town America, something more needs to be done to correct damages to the natural resources of the community.