



New Webpage Helps Spread Word About PBB

By Emma Selmon
Herald News Editor

COVID-19 has slowed down a lot of local organizations over the past ten months, but one group committed to the health of mid-Michigan's residents and environment is still making progress towards their goals. The Pine River Superfund Citizen Task Force (CAG), a community organization formed over two decades ago to address the aftermath of the former Michigan Chemical Corporation/Velsicol plant site in St. Louis, has continued to meet virtually throughout the shutdown. The group is involved in a number of efforts surrounding the plant site, from their support of the environment chemical cleanup taking place to their work to answer the ongoing human health questions resulting from the PBB disaster of the 1970s. This accident occurred when the Michigan Chemical Corporation mistakenly sent the flame retardant PBB to a Farm Bureau Services feed supply facility in place of magnesium oxide, a livestock feed supplement. As a result, millions of Michiganders consumed food products contaminated with the chemical — and residents are still feeling the health effects today.

The CAG hit a long-awaited milestone last month as the State of Michigan established a dedicated webpage to PBB and its effects on human health. The webpage, which can be found at michigan.gov/PBB, guides visitors to resources about the history of PBB in Michigan and known health effects of PBB. It also includes information about past and current PBB studies and how to join, as well as information about how to request the records of a deceased immediate family member's participation in past PBB studies. CAG Chair Jane Keon said that "it's certainly high time" for such a resource to be made available. "The fact that this webpage now gives people an opportunity to link up with the actual research that's going on now, and the studies that may help alleviate some of the health outcomes from being exposed to PBB... that's the real exciting part," she said. The CAG has been collaborating with a number of other organizations to "keep the PBB legacy from being forgotten," including the PBB Citizens Advisory Board, the Mid-Michigan District Health Department (MMDHD) and the Emory University PBB research team, Keon said. She said the state established the webpage partly in response to their work, which has included face-to-face talks with Lansing legislators and officials from the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services. She said it has "definitely" been a goal of this group to have this information readily available from the state, but the CAG's work is far from done.

Prior to COVID, they have been collaborating with Emory University to travel around the state for informational PBB community meetings, where they have worked to spread the word about the PBB contamination and encourage affected residents to send their information to Emory University's study. Since COVID hit, the in-person meetings haven't been possible, but they have soldiered on virtually. And so far, the payoff has been good: in one fall online community meeting they held, the CAG had well over 100 new people join in and send their information to the university. Keon said it was "thrilling" that they were able to reach so many people with a single event. With the success of the virtual events, Keon said that CAG plans to continue their efforts to reach people remotely. But of course, not everything can be done behind a computer screen. For the clinical trial involved with the study, there has to be some face-to-face interaction so that blood can be drawn and samples can be taken. And thanks to the continued efforts of the MMDHD, this contact has still been possible. Even during the pandemic, they've been "suited up [and] opening up the health department just so these people can come and have their blood drawn," Keon said. Between their clinical work for PBB carriers and their help with legislative talks in Lansing, the MMDHD has been an invaluable resource to the CAG. "They've been marvelous in all of this," Keon said. Keon and the CAG are glad that they've been able to continue to make progress in their work with PBB amid the pandemic, and they are glad to continue their work for years to come.

“We will continue what we’ve been doing, which is to look into the past and try to find any clues from the past that might help us understand now and the future, but at the same time, we’re involved with present-day efforts to help people learn about this and get involved, and keep the PBB studies moving forward,” she said.

MDHHS Michigan Department of Health & Human Services

Assistance Programs | Adult & Children's Services | Safety & Injury Prevention | Keeping Michigan Healthy | Doing Business with MDHHS | Inside MDHHS

Safety & Injury Prevention

MDHHS / SAFETY & INJURY PREVENTION / PUBLIC SAFETY & ENVIRONMENTAL HEALTH / TOXIC SUBSTANCES

Poly-brominated biphenyls (PBBs) in Michigan

Polybrominated biphenyls (PBBs) are man-made chemicals commonly used as a fire retardant in plastic products before they were banned in the United States in 1976. However, since PBBs don't break down quickly in nature, they have stayed in our environment for decades. PBBs can build up in people who are exposed and remain there for many years, as well.

In the early 1970s, thousands of Michigan residents were exposed to polybrominated biphenyls (PBBs). This happened after a factory in St. Louis, Michigan that made PBBs accidentally shipped the chemicals instead of an animal feed supplement to feed mills across the state. This mix-up resulted in many thousands of animals eating PBBs in their feed. The PBBs were passed along to people when they ate meat or eggs or drank milk from these animals. Many of the factory workers were exposed to PBBs through their work, too. It was later discovered that PBBs could also be passed along to babies of exposed mothers while in the womb or through their breast milk.

Since the mix-up in the 1970s, the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS) responded by studying Michigan residents who were directly exposed to PBBs for both short- and long-term health impacts. Over time, these studies on PBBs have continued. During the early 2000s, active studies about exposure to PBBs shifted to Emory University. Emory University developed its own study on people exposed to PBBs based on the work done by MDHHS.

How to Join Emory University's PBB study

If you were part of the Michigan Long-Term PBB study run by MDHHS and wish to participate in Emory University's PBB study, you must go to the Emory University website to fill out a *Transfer Your PBB Records* form. By doing this, you give MDHHS permission to transfer your records to Emory University. Additional information about Emory's PBB study can be found on their study website.

The newly-available PBB website through the Michigan Department of Health and Human Services (MDHHS), found at michigan.gov/PBB, contains a variety of resources.