

Water Front- Peter Mantius

Environmental politics in New York's Finger Lakes

DEC Emails on Burning Toxic PFAS at Norlite Incinerator Prompt Calls for Probe by NYS Inspector General

[Peter Mantius](#) / [February 12, 2021](#)[February 12, 2021](#) / [Uncategorized](#)



COHOES, Feb. 12, 2021 — Recently disclosed emails on the burning of PFAS-laced fire-fighting foam at an incinerator 10 miles north of Albany have [prompted calls](https://waterfrontonline.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/inspectorgeneralletterforcohoespfas.pdf) (<https://waterfrontonline.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/inspectorgeneralletterforcohoespfas.pdf>) for the state Inspector General to investigate the staff of the state Department of Environmental Conservation.

The emails raise new questions about when the agency learned that the Norlite incinerator was secretly burning the highly toxic

foam and why it didn't halt the practice sooner.

During 2018 and 2019, Norlite incinerated at least 2.4 million pounds of the foam, known as AFFF. It was imported from military sites in 25 states under a contract Norlite's parent company had with the Department of Defense, which has been cancelled.



Norlite's incinerator 10 miles north of Albany.

The foam is made with per- and poly-fluoroalkyl compounds, or PFAS, a class of persistent "forever chemicals" (<https://www.dec.ny.gov/chemical/108831.html>) that can cause cancer, liver disease and other serious health problems.

While the toxic chemicals were being burned and emitted within several hundred feet of the Saratoga Sites public housing project, the public and city officials in Cohoes weren't told about the practice until the spring of 2020.

In its announcement last April, the DEC stated that it had first learned about the AFFF burning "in late 2019" and had immediately ordered Norlite to stop it.

But in an [April 2, 2019 email](https://waterfrontonline.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/cohoesemails.pdf) (<https://waterfrontonline.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/cohoesemails.pdf>), the Director of DEC's Region 4 asked an official with Norlite's parent company, Tradebe Treatment and Recycling LLC, to



provide data on air and water discharges from “thermal destruction of Triple A fire fighting foam at your facility.”

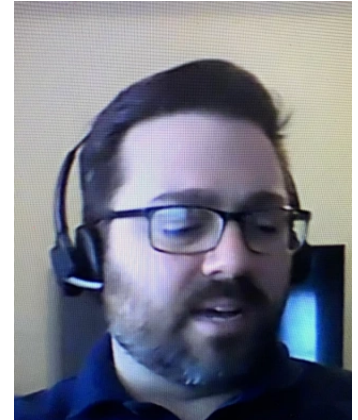


Keith Goertz

The DEC supervisor, Keith D. Goertz, went on to say:

“The purpose of this is to verify that total destruction of pfos (a PFAS variant) is accomplished during incineration. There are so few effective ways to manage this waste, it would be great to show that incineration is a viable option.”

The Goertz email, which was shared with DEC materials management engineer Victoria Schmitt, “clearly demonstrates senior officials at DEC were aware of and directly endorsed PFAS incineration at Norlite,” said Christopher Sevinsky, a nearby resident.



Chris Sevinsky

In response to the email disclosure, Judith Enck, a former regional administrator with the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, called for the closure of the Norlite facility and for an IG investigation of the DEC.

“This is an important environmental justice issue,” Enck said Thursday. “The incinerator operates in the middle of a city and next to public housing apartments where 70 families live. If it were a more affluent area, it would have been shut down a long time ago.”



The Norlite facility (left) is several hundred feet from Saratoga Sites (right).

Joe Ritchie, a Saratoga Sites resident, joined Enck and Sevinsky in calling for the DEC to close the facility and for Inspector General Letizia Tagliafierro to launch an investigation of the DEC staff.

“The DEC has lied to residents of Saratoga Sites and Cohoes,” Ritchie said. “They



behave as spokespeople for Norlite rather than their external watchdog.”

A locally produced video



Joe Richie

(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjeMSTUByHk>) went further in blasting the DEC’s role at Norlite.

In response to questions from WaterFront, DEC Commissioner Basil Seggos did not directly address the call for a state IG investigation.

“DEC is taking a hard look at this facility’s entire operations, including investigating the complete history of AFFF incineration, dust mitigation and control efforts, and undertaking our own comprehensive, expert-led study of any potential PFAS soil and water contamination in this community,” Seggos said in a Feb. 11 statement

(<https://waterfrontonline.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/seggosstatementfeb11pdf.pdf>).

He noted that the agency had cited Norlite on Wednesday for several dust-related air quality violations. Norlite has said that it strives to remain in compliance with all regulatory requirements, and it has entered into numerous consent agreements

(<https://waterfrontonline.files.wordpress.com/2020/11/norliteenforcementhistory.pdf>) with the DEC.

“To suggest DEC is in cahoots with Norlite is absolutely absurd,” Seggos added.

“As we’ve said all along, when DEC executives learned that Norlite had been accepting AFFF that contained PFAS, we put a stop to it even though it wasn’t illegal at the time.”

But Enck, who supervised New York and New Jersey for the EPA during the Obama Administration, said: “Norlite did not have a permit to burn AFFF. The burning was illegal and it’s odd that the DEC still does not acknowledge this.”



Basil Seggos

Enck also said Goertz, as a former DEC regional director, had to qualify as a “DEC executive.”

Those calling for the IG investigation urged a focus on Goertz and Joe Hadersbeck, the DEC’s long-time monitor at the Norlite site. Last November, Hadersbeck told New York Focus



Judith Enck

(<https://waterfrontonline.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/nyfocusarticlenov2020.pdf>), an investigative news publication, that he knew firefighting foam was being burned at the site in 2018, and he expressed skepticism about environmental threats that it posed.

Goertz, who supervised Hadersbeck, retired in December after six years as Region 4 Director. Hadersbeck has been transferred.

The DEC confirmed Wednesday that Hadersbeck remains an agency employee, but it declined to say where he worked or in what capacity.

The Norlite controversy spurred one of the nation’s first state laws limiting potential PFAS air pollution. In November Gov. Andrew Cuomo signed a bill (<https://waterfrontonline.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/billbanspfasburningcohoeswaterfr.pdf>) banning incineration of firefighting foam at the Norlite plant.



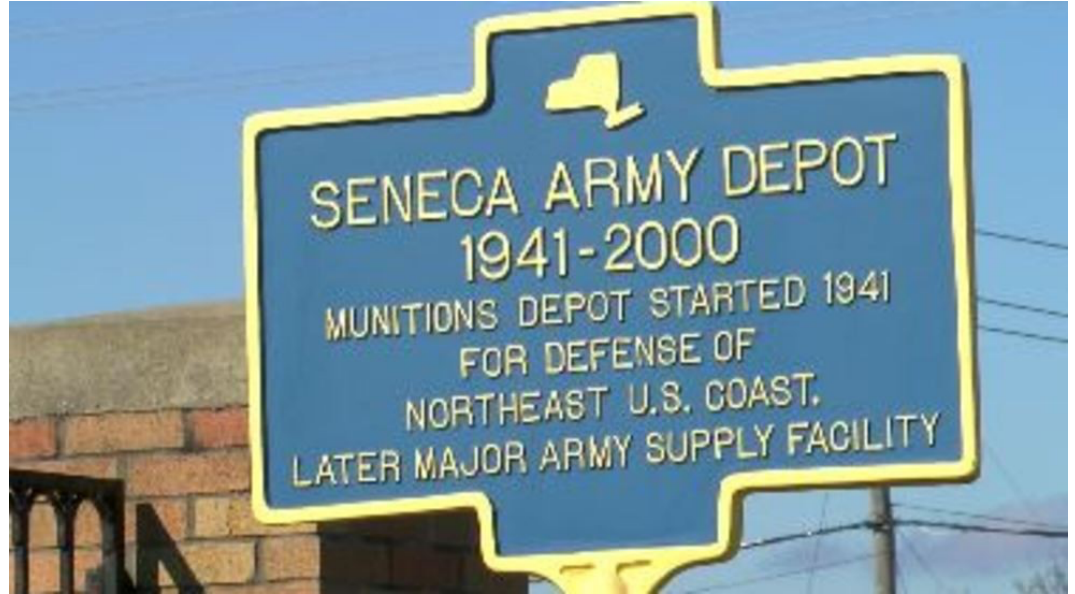
PFAS pollution is a major concern at federal and state environmental agencies. However, most regulatory effort is focused on drinking water, and New York State is a national leader on that front.

Under recently established state regulations, all public water systems are required to take remedial action if either of two common PFAS compounds, PFOS or PFOA, exceed 10 parts per trillion in tap water.

Water systems throughout the Finger Lakes have been testing for those substances in recent months, but the results have not been widely shared with the public. The DOH has repeatedly postponed its response (<https://waterfrontonline.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/dohhidespfasdatawaterfront.pdf>)

to a Freedom of Information request by WaterFront for its lists of PFAS hot spots.

The former Seneca Army Depot in Romulus is one of the region's few known PFAS contamination sites. But the DEC has identified dozens of airports and manufacturing sites that used or stored AFFF and may have contaminated local water supplies.



The state's crackdown on PFAS in drinking water followed disclosures of high levels of PFOA in Hoosick Falls tap water.

The problem was widely revealed five years ago when an Albany newspaper reported on water tests paid for by a local resident, whose father had died of cancer.

After what critics considered a slow start, the Cuomo Administration's Department of Health worked with the DEC to develop some of the nation's strictest standards for PFAS water contamination.

As part of its assessment of PFOA contamination in Hoosick Falls, the DOH conducted blood tests on residents. The mean level of PFOA for those tested was about 11 times the national average (<https://waterfrontonline.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/politicobloodtestsarticle.pdf>).

For many months, a Cohoes group has pleaded with the DEC to press for blood tests for residents near the Norlite incinerator.

"We urge you to coordinate with DOH to conduct such testing immediately," a group of five scientists and doctors (<https://waterfrontonline.files.wordpress.com/2021/02/saratoga5lettertodec.pdf>) wrote the DEC last September on behalf of Saratoga Sites Against Norlite Emissions.

They asked DEC officials to reconsider their stance of postponing all blood tests until after water and soil test results showed PFAS contamination.

When DEC officials stood firm, the scientists insisted that immediate blood tests were called for — at least for those who request them.

"Primary exposure," they wrote, "may be from inhaling airborne emissions from Norlite stacks rather than from people drinking surface water or eating soil."

Published by Peter Mantius

I am a journalist who lives in Watkins Glen, NY. I write about the environment and politics on my website, [Waterfrontonline.blog](https://waterfrontonline.blog). For more detail on my background, see the "Peter's Bio" section on that site. [View all posts by Peter Mantius](#)

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1. **Kathy says:**[February 15, 2021 at 3:54 pm](#)
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