

Dingell to probe why EPA official leaving job

Concerns raised after regional director claims her ousting is related to Dow Chemical dioxin cleanup.

Deb Price / The Detroit News

WASHINGTON -- U.S. Rep. John Dingell, D-Detroit, ordered his oversight staff on Friday to look into a charge by the top Midwest official of the Environmental Protection Agency that she was forced out because she was aggressively pushing Dow Chemical Co. to clean up dioxin contamination in a 52-mile stretch of waterway that dumps into Saginaw Bay.

Dingell, chairman of the House Energy and Commerce Committee, "is concerned" about the EPA official's allegation, Dingell spokeswoman Jodi Seth said, and asked his staff to investigate.

Mary Gade, the regional administrator of EPA's Region 5, which includes Michigan, told the Chicago Tribune that she resigned after she was stripped of her authority and told to quit or be fired by June 1.

"There is no question this is about Dow," Gade was quoted as saying.

Dow Chemical of Midland denies that it had anything to do with Gade's departure.

EPA spokesman Jonathan Shradar said Gade has been placed on administrative leave and plans to leave June 1. Bharat Mathur has been appointed as acting administrator for the region.

Asked about Gade's charges, Shradar said "we cannot discuss personnel matters." But he said Dow "fully complied" with EPA requests "and we expect them to continue to do that."

Dow spokesman John Musser and Michigan Department of Environmental Quality spokesman Robert McCann said Gade's departure won't affect what is expected to be one of the largest cleanups of toxic material in Michigan history. Several highly contaminated spots have been cleaned up, but no date is set for the larger project.

"From our point of view, nothing has changed. We are resolved to getting this situation dealt with," Musser said.

McCann said the M-DEQ will continue taking the lead on the project, "with the EPA backing us up... We don't plan on (Gade's departure) having any impact on the work we are trying to get done."

The EPA, M-DEQ and Dow Chemical are working on a cleanup plan for dioxin contamination from chemical processes, some of which date back to World War I.

The contamination affects sediment in the Tittabawassee and Saginaw rivers, which flow into Saginaw Bay.

Hugh McDiarmid of the Michigan Environmental Council said the advocacy group fears Gade's departure "will reduce the pressure and impetus for Dow to clean up the dioxin that has been sitting there for decades and decades. It's a dangerous compound that is in the fish and wild game in the area that people eat."

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