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Ciba site danger remains, say feds

Toxic levels in Tombigbee River swamps are still a threat to the environment, according to the EPA, which may require a cleanup over a much larger area

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Tombigbee River swamps adjacent to the Ciba Corp. factory and Superfund site in McIntosh are still contaminated with DDT at levels dangerous to the environment, despite a cleanup effort by the company, according to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.

Ciba will likely be required to clean up a far larger area of the widely contaminated 370-acre swamp than the small 12-acre plot the company dug up in the 1990s, according to federal officials. EPA officials had allowed the company to clean just a small portion of the swamp, over the objections of other federal agencies, such as the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. Fish & Wildlife biologists did not believe such a limited cleanup would protect the Mobile-Tensaw Delta or Mobile Bay from DDT contamination.

"Risks to fish, wildlife and humans appear to extend from the (Ciba) site to Mobile Bay," concluded a 2002 Fish & Wildlife report.

The latest five-year review from the EPA states that DDT remains at "ecologically unacceptable concentrations" and says the cleanup "is not protective of the environment." Calls to the EPA had not been returned by press time.

Ciba began manufacturing DDT, one of the most potent and long lasting pesticides ever created, in 1952 at the McIntosh facility. Although a number of other pesticides have been manufactured there, DDT was invented by the company and remained in widespread use until it was banned in 1972 because of dramatic and unforeseen impacts in the environment. DDT was the main culprit in the near extinction of both brown pelicans on the Gulf Coast and the bald eagle. Fish & Wildlife is

presently investigating the role of DDT pollution in the poor nesting success of osprey in the Mobile–Tensaw Delta.

Ciba's facility was listed as a federal Superfund cleanup site beginning in 1984 because of widespread contamination of groundwater, soil and swamps on the company property. The Superfund designation is applied to the most contaminated sites in the United States and means federal officials supervise remediation activities. Ciba and the adjacent Olin Corp. facility are each home to contaminated swamps that have never been cleaned up, despite more than 20 years on the Superfund list.

Ciba officials said they had not yet been able to review the newly released report.

"We really haven't had a chance to go through the report itself. It was delivered last week and most of our health and environment staff are still out for the holidays," said Denise Taylor, a Ciba spokesperson. "Next week, when we're back in the office, evaluating the report will be our top priority."

An earlier Press–Register investigation revealed that Ciba's efforts failed to remove DDT from even the small 12–acre plot and found that the EPA's clean up goal of 15 parts per million for mud in the swamp was 500 times higher than clean up goals for DDT–contaminated Superfund sites in other states.

Scientists say the risks of DDT exposure for wildlife begin to increase quickly when DDT levels in sediments are above 1 part per million.

The newspaper previously reported that Ciba data revealed numerous areas that have never been cleaned up, despite having DDT contamination present at levels above 1,000 parts per million. The new EPA report identifies 17 acres with an average DDT concentration of 240 parts per million, 21 acres with an average of 224 parts per million, 32 acres with an average of 156 parts per million and 37 acres with an average of 134 parts per million.

EPA officials in 2003 said the cleanup was restricted to such a small area to protect what they described as "virgin cypress–hardwood forests" along the river. Scientists contacted by the newspaper questioned the

EPA's logic and pointed out that the Ciba swamp is part of the 60,000 acre Mobile-Tensaw Delta, comprised of tens of thousands of acres of similar floodplain forests dominated by cypress and tupelo trees.

A much more important goal for the cleanup would have been removing the DDT from contact with the Tombigbee River. The river floods its banks for four to seven months each year and entirely covers the contaminated swamp, meaning DDT is continually washed from the site to Mobile Bay, according to scientists.

The newspaper obtained Ciba documents in 2003 through a Freedom of Information Act request and found that EPA officials abandoned the agency's typical protocols and allowed the bulk of the poison to remain in those swamps, contaminating fish and other wildlife over a broad area, including areas well downstream of McIntosh.

For instance, DDT present in pelicans and fish in Mobile Bay can be linked to the contamination upstream based on the mix of certain compounds found in the DDT at both the Ciba site and in creatures living in the bay, according to documents from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service. While company officials have long disputed that the DDT found in Mobile Bay fish, oysters and birds originated at their factory, University of South Alabama chemistry professor Wayne Ishfording -- after reviewing the federal data in 2003 described it as "one of the most compelling chemical fingerprints I've seen."

Federal officials have not yet determined how the swamps will be cleaned up, and said a decision would be reached in the next few months.

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