

Hello. I'm Jim Tedder in Washington. Welcome to a special edition of "As It Is." 17 years ago, an American energy company paid hundreds of millions of dollars to settle legal claims brought by people in the town of Hinkley, California. The people claimed that Pacific Gas & Electric poisoned their well water by putting industrial waste into the ground. Their story was told in the film "Erin Brockovich." But the legal settlement is not the end of the story. Now, the future of the town is unclear.

It seemed there was a happy ending to the pollution case for residents of Hinkley. But there is more to the story. Since the settlement, the harmful groundwater has continued to spread. The groundwater contains hexavalent chromium, a harmful chemical also known as chromium 6.

Things seem normal now. But many families are leaving the town. The Hinkley School is set to close forever in June. Sonja Pellerin, a teacher, expresses sadness about the closure.

"We're learning everyday different areas the kids are moving to now, and we've had many, many tears. Some people have lived here for a generation, and it is turning families upside down."

For several years, the number of children attending the Hinkley School has been falling. Now, education officials say they cannot keep the school open.

Once each month, school officials invite families to eat with their children. Roberta Walker went there recently to be with her grandchildren. She is angry that Pacific Gas & Electric did not accept school officials' request to buy the school to keep it open.

“The school was the biggest, biggest part of the community. And they refused to admit that they were at fault for the decline in enrollment.”

In the 1990s, Roberta Walker led legal action by hundreds of Hinkley residents against PG&E. They accused the company of putting cooling water from a natural gas compression plant into unlined ponds. The waste polluted groundwater wells, which provided the town's drinking water.

The case blamed the company for the increased rate of cancer and other diseases that followed. The company settled. Roberta Walker used her share of the settlement money to build new homes for herself and her daughters.

But chromium 6 has appeared again in the well water. She and her daughters are negotiating with PG&E to buy their houses. She says that after leaving, she will take no further action.

“...And once I leave and once I get out of here, am I going to (continue a legal fight)? No, I’m not. I’m tired. I’m done. ”

PG&E has agreed to buy the property of one-third of Hinkley’s residents. Company spokesman Jeff Smith has said repeatedly over the years that PG&E wants to make sure the town survives.

“We certainly remained committed to working with the people of Hinkley. If their preference is to have their property purchased and to depart from the community, we want to make sure we have that option available to them as well.”

At the national level, the Environmental Protection Agency has spent the past five years studying new limits on chromium 6 in the environment. The EPA released a draft assessment on the subject in 2010. But scientists are still considering that study. The agency says it would not be right to change national requirements for drinking water until the process is complete.

Renee Sharp is with the Environmental Working Group, a private research and activist group. She says the problems in Hinkley demonstrate how society can lack the measures necessary for protecting people.

Under California state orders, PG&E is still attempting to clean up the area. It has been pumping millions of liters of polluted water onto nearby alfalfa fields each year. That may sound strange, but the goal is to let microbes in the soil break down the poison. The company also is pumping ethanol into

the ground to start a chemical reaction designed to neutralize the chromium. Last October, project engineer Kevin Sullivan said his crew has cleaned up about 22 hectares or about 54 acres of land.

“...Believe me, I understand that if it’s not your property, you know, (you’ll ask) What have you done for me lately?’ But 54 acres is a lot of progress.”

Still, that amount is only a small part of the environmental damage. Three years ago, state water quality officials estimated that the industrial waste stretched a little more than four kilometers long. The most recent state report says it may now extend more than 11 kilometers.

Lauri Kemper of the state water quality board says it is spreading at more than half a meter every day. She says it seems like the more that officials look, the more they are finding. And she says that is frightening.

Until recently, 83-year-old Patsy Morris wanted to stay in Hinkley. But with so many people moving out, she decided she has no choice but to leave like the others. She says the decision makes her sad and angry.

“You get a bitterness about the whole thing. They’re just going to make this a big dustbowl, that’s all I can say about it. My friends are leaving, one way or another. It gets you, you know?”

PG&E estimates it could take another 40 years to clean up all of the chromium 6 pollution. That makes the people of Hinkley laugh. They predict that within ten years, no one will be living in the town.

World news follows at the beginning of the hour on VOA. Thank you for spending some time with us today on this Thursday, the 23rd day of May. American singer Jewel is celebrating a birthday today. She is 39. And here is a bit of American history for you. On this date in 1934, bank robbers Bonnie and Clyde were shot to death by a law enforcement group in Gibsland, Louisiana. Even though Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow were outlaws, many Americans eagerly followed their crimes in the newspapers, and made them into folk heroes. We will see you tomorrow.