



Save the Sound®

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
November 30, 2017

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Gaps in Plum Island Contamination Cleanup Plans, New Report Finds

Save the Sound urges Homeland Security to work with New York to meet environmental standards

New Haven, Conn. – [A report commissioned by Save the Sound](#) has identified gaps in the federal government’s draft plan for the cleanup of past contamination on Plum Island, NY. The island is currently home to our nation’s foreign animal disease research center and is the site of Fort Terry, in use from the Spanish-American War through World War II.

Peter Dermody, C.P.G., principal hydrogeologist at Dermody Consulting, analyzed a number of environmental studies performed on the federally-owned island from 1999 to 2016. He found unanswered questions about groundwater testing, soil vapor testing, landfills, an oil spill, and a decommissioned building. The Department of Homeland Security, which currently manages the island, has not, thus far, developed a work plan that meets New York’s cleanup standards.

“We know that there are dozens of areas throughout the island where waste materials were landfilled and partial investigations were performed,” Dermody said. “However, the investigations were not in compliance with the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation landfill regulations or the New York State Department of Health soil vapor intrusion guidance. For years, Homeland Security personnel have folded their arms and delayed performing the investigations required by New York State regulations and guidelines.”

Despite significant data gaps in the Environmental Impact Statement—a document that the federal government was obligated to develop as part of the effort to sell the island—in 2013 the Department of Homeland Security and the General Services Administration issued a formal decision to sell Plum Island. Later that year **Governor Andrew Cuomo** sent the Department of Homeland Security [a letter](#) requesting that the agency “promptly propose a work plan to finally address all of these remaining issues and implement a site-wide groundwater investigation...governed by an enforceable order with an aggressive schedule.”

Earlier this month, Homeland Security provided DEC with a document titled “After Action Report for Addressing Data Gaps at Former WMAs [waste management areas] and AOPCs [areas of potential concern], Plum Island Animal Disease Center.” That report has not yet been made public.

“There’s a disturbing disconnect here between the federal agencies,” **said Louise Harrison, New York natural areas coordinator for Save the Sound**. “The General Services Administration is pushing forward to sell the island while Homeland Security is dragging its feet on the plan to clean it up. We’re concerned that this extended delay and drawn-out process will further stretch DEC’s already-strained resources. It’s time for Homeland Security to give this matter the time and attention it deserves, accept New York’s requirements for environmental quality, and work with the State to develop a complete work plan that solves the knowledge and data gaps. We want Plum Island made safe for people and wildlife.”

Dermody Consulting identifies several key actions, including:

- Groundwater sampling should be continued, and past results made available for comparison with updated ones.
- Sampling at landfill sites should be compared to current soil cleanup objectives.
- Soil samples should be tested for volatile organic compounds.
- Homeland Security should continue to make public information about the petroleum release near Building 102, including the size of the release and progress towards the completion of the ongoing cleanup.
- Information on the decontamination process of Building 257 should be provided in detail.
- Data from past and future investigations must be evaluated according to DEC and New York State Department of Health standards, regulations, and guidance for soil, soil vapor, and groundwater.

“Everyone wants Plum Island cleaned up for the multitude of species that call it home and the people who visit and do research there,” Harrison said. “And it benefits everyone to dispense with contamination rumors and instead get the facts. We’re asking Homeland Security and the State of New York to commit resources to agree on a comprehensive work plan. This way, the federal government can get started on a full cleanup that meets New York’s high standards for environmental health.”

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