THE BLADE

Legacy of Luckey
Reaction, follow-up articles, editorials

April 25, 2025

Ohio EPA issues special advisory regarding Luckey water

BLADE STAFF

Hours after The Blade published an investigation Friday detailing how testing by the newspaper found high levels of radioactivity in the groundwater of the village of Luckey, the Ohio EPA issued a special "citizen advisory," saying that the agency and the Ohio Department of Health would start sampling in the community next week.

"The results will be reviewed carefully, and any concerns will prompt immediate coordination with school officials, local government, and residents to determine the next steps," the advisory, released Friday afternoon, said.

The Ohio EPA said it would test "key community locations," including Eastwood Local Schools, the Pemberville Public Library, and two branch libraries in Luckey and Stony Ridge.

The Ohio EPA said it had communicated with the Eastwood Schools superintendent, the Pemberville Public Library, and the mayor of Luckey "to provide updates and assure them that there is currently no cause for alarm."

The agency said that The Blade's testing showed "some contaminant detections; however, all levels remain well within state and federal drinking water standards."

May 7, 2025

Luckey residents express concerns about drinking water

By ALEXA YORK
BLADE STAFF WRITER

LUCKEY, Ohio — Village resident and former mayor Belinda Brooks wanted to know if illnesses in the community could be traced back to the drinking water.

Her son, Aaron, asked officials if they thought The Blade's recent well water testing results suggested a potential health risk to the town.

Alexandra Evans, a 28-year-old who grew up in Luckey, said she was upset to learn that the former Cold War weapons at the edge of the village could still be affecting the health of local residents today.

"We have been failed by the systems that were supposed to protect us," she said. "We are not just statistics. We are neighbors, parents, children, and friends. And now something has to change."

These were some of the concerns expressed at Wednesday's regular village council meeting.

The village has been wrestling with the possibility of contaminated well water since The Blade recently published results of its comprehensive testing in the community. Those results, published online April 25, documented how samples of well water from homes, businesses, and public places showed radioactivity at least 10 times greater than what the federal government says is normal for the area.

Luckey Mayor Cory Panning opened the meeting by explaining that the village has been in contact with state agencies on the next steps.

“We’ve been informed by the Ohio EPA, the Ohio Department of Health, and the Wood County Department of Health that there is not an immediate concern for our drinking water,” he said.

Mayor Panning encouraged residents to test radon in their homes and explained how they could order free test kits from the state health department.

“If you’ve never tested for radon, it’s probably something you should be requesting,” he said.

Wood County Health Commissioner Ben Robison was present at Wednesday’s council meeting to take questions from Luckey residents and explain next steps.

“U.S. EPA says there isn’t a safe level of radon in indoor air,” Mr. Robison added. “We encourage every resident, not just Luckey residents, to conduct a radon test.”

He said that radon occurs naturally in the environment, though he would not speculate on whether the levels The Blade found could be connected to the contaminants at the former Cold War weapons site.

“Our state departments are taking this really seriously,” Mr. Robison said. “We depend on them to understand the data that informs risk.”

“I want to say today,” he added, “that the information that we have does not demonstrate a health risk, even from what The Blade has reported. But it has opened a question.”

Earlier Wednesday, state regulators announced that they have begun testing local water for contaminants and that more sampling is on the way.

Just hours before Luckey Village Council meeting, officials from the Ohio EPA said that samples from nine public locations, such as the local library, have been collected. The samples are to be tested at an independent lab, with the results expected in a month, officials said.

The testing is in response to a recent Blade investigation that found high levels of radioactivity in the drinking water in and around the Wood County village.

The year-long investigation was published in the newspaper's April 27 and May 4 editions.

Officials from the Ohio Department of Health, which is taking the lead on testing private homes, said they are distributing a fact sheet around the village, in part, to alert residents who might be interested in having their water tested.

Speaking at a news conference at the village's largest public park, Amy Klei, chief of the Ohio EPA's Division of Drinking and Ground Waters, referenced The Blade's findings.

"With all of the information we have reviewed to date, the data we have in hand, we have not seen any results that indicate it is not safe to drink," she said. "Out of an abundance of caution, when it comes to drinking water, we will take those extra steps to do follow-up testing to be sure."

Luckey-area resident Karina Hahn-Claydon said she was grateful that the state "stepped up to the plate."

"We all know someone that we wonder, 'Were they affected by long-term exposure to chemicals?" she said. "Hopefully, the water testing will tell."

Ms. Hahn-Claydon said she hopes the state officials will "cross their t's and dot their i's" and completely investigate the area.

For 80 years, Luckey has been home to a 44-acre tract of land that once was one of the most critical defense sites in the nation and now is one of the most toxic. Built by the War Department in 1942, the property has housed a magnesium plant for the Manhattan Project and, in the 1950s, a beryllium production facility for America's Cold War weapons programs.

Almost all the old buildings are gone, and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has been removing thousands of tons of tainted soil from the property.

To gauge whether the property was affecting the nearby village, a Blade reporter collected water samples between the spring of 2024 and January and sent them to Eurofins Environment Testing, an accredited

lab in St. Louis. The lab analyzed the samples for radioactivity and other contaminants. The Blade testing was funded by the Pulitzer Center, a nonprofit organization offering investigative reporting grants.

One sample from Eastwood Middle School showed radioactivity 10 times above normal background levels. Another sample from the Luckey Library was 45 times higher. A sample from a water pump near athletic fields was 1,731 times greater than normal.

The radioactivity The Blade detected was primarily bismuth-214, which decays from the radioactive gas radon-222. Radiation experts agree that high levels of bismuth-214 suggest that high levels of radon are present, too. Radon exposure is the leading cause of lung cancer in nonsmokers.

May 13, 2025

Schools near Luckey report low radon levels, will test again in November

By ALEXA YORK
BLADE STAFF WRITER

LUCKEY, Ohio — Results from state-sponsored air testing last week showed low levels of radon at Eastwood Local Schools, but officials say more testing is planned for November.

Between May 6 and 8, 164 air samples were collected from frequently occupied rooms in the high school, middle school, and elementary school, which are located two miles south of an aging nuclear site being cleaned up by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

The highest result, 1.4 picocuries per liter, found at the high school, was well below the U.S. EPA's recommended action level of 4 pCi/L. The highest level at the middle school was 1 pCi/L, and the highest level at the elementary school was 0.8 pCi/L.

“These results are welcome news, and had they come back over the EPA standard, we would have had immediate concerns,” Eastwood superintendent Brent Welker wrote in a Tuesday morning email to the community.

The radon testing is in response to a recent Blade investigation that found high levels of radioactivity in the drinking water in and around Luckey.

Those results, published online April 25, documented how roughly half of the well water samples from homes, businesses, and public places showed radioactivity at least 10 times greater than what the federal government says is normal background for the area.

One sample The Blade tested came from a drinking fountain at Eastwood Middle School. Those results showed radioactivity 10 times higher than background.

The newspaper shared those results with two experts in environmental radiation, who estimated the groundwater radon level was 118,902 pCi/L when the sample was collected.

According to the EPA, 10,000 pCi/L in groundwater translates to roughly 1 pCi/L in air, so groundwater levels above 40,000 pCi/L could potentially exceed the recommended air limit of 4 pCi/L.

Experts agree that radon levels are highly variable and are affected by a variety of factors like temperature, weather conditions, building construction, and even the time of day. Seasonal variations matter, too, as fluctuations in temperature and water tables can affect radon levels.

Both the EPA and the Ohio Department of Health recommend performing radon testing between October and March, when buildings are sealed up for the heating season. During the warmer months, buildings are better ventilated and indoor radon levels are generally lower.

“We cannot solely rely on a spring testing result to determine radon levels in our buildings,” Mr. Welker wrote. “That is why we are scheduled to test again in November, in line with EPA protocols.”

There are no federally enforced radon regulations, and schools are not required to have a radon mitigation system.

But the U.S. EPA recommends that all schools test for radon, regardless of location. The Eastwood school district does not regularly check for radon, Mr. Welker told The Blade in April. According to online EPA data, just 20 percent of schools nationwide have tested for radon.

Radon is a naturally occurring radioactive gas that can be found at varying levels across the country. It is particularly mobile in the environment compared to other elements in its decay chain, such as radium-226 or uranium-238.

Last week's radon tests were conducted by Brumbaugh-Herrick, a Monclova-based environmental testing and consulting firm. The state said it provided a $20,000 grant to cover both the recent tests and upcoming sampling in the fall.

May 16, 2025

Luckey waiting for water answers

By ALEXA YORK
BLADE STAFF WRITER

With results of the state's water sampling expected in June, Luckey residents continue to await answers and digest the response from public officials.

"We are still awaiting updated results from the Ohio EPA's sampling," Luckey Mayor Cory Panning told The Blade Thursday. "Any time we get updated info, we will post it online."

The state collected drinking water samples last week in several locations in and around the village and sent them to a private, accredited laboratory in South Carolina.

Mayor Panning said the village is continuing to work with the state agencies to receive guidance on the “next crucial steps.”

The sampling program is in response to a recent Blade investigation that found high levels of radioactivity in the drinking water in and around the village.

Residents can check the village’s website for updates, Mayor Panning said, or visit the Ohio EPA’s website for current information on its sampling in Luckey.

One former Luckey resident, 28-year-old Alexandra Evans, has been particularly outspoken about her own health problems and desire for change.

Ms. Evans, who now lives in Toledo, created an online petition to add Luckey to the list of communities eligible for government compensation from radiation exposure. It has surpassed 3,500 signatures — more than three times the population of Luckey — in less than two weeks.

“Is it embarrassing to tell people I’m about to get my third colonoscopy? Yeah, it is, and it’s for the greater good,” she said.

The legislation referenced in Ms. Evans’ petition, the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act, expired in June. Efforts to renew the RECA in late 2024 were unsuccessful when the provision was stripped from a defense spending bill.

The program had provided lump sum compensation to thousands of Americans unknowingly exposed to radiation by the federal government.

In January, Sen. Josh Hawley (R., Mo.) introduced a bipartisan bill to reauthorize the RECA. Seven other senators signed on, and it is currently pending committee review.

Neither Luckey nor any of Ohio’s other nuclear sites were eligible for compensation under the now-expired legislation. But Senator Hawley’s bill would add affected Missouri communities to the list, and Ms. Evans thinks the same should be done for Luckey.

“I’ve always had a strong passion for justice,” she said. “When I find something I care about, I can’t let it go.”

Others have wondered whether the sampling could affect the village's proposed plan to use eminent domain to acquire a former limestone quarry as a source of public drinking water for the village.

The proposed water plan has sparked controversy in recent years, in part because of its close proximity to the former nuclear weapons site that sits just outside the village.

In March, the Ohio 6th District Court of Appeals ruled in favor of the village, allowing the eminent domain to proceed.

Zachary Murry, the attorney representing the quarry owners, said he has not been contacted following the publication of The Blade's water testing on April 25.

"We have heard nothing," Mr. Murry said. "My clients have not been contacted by the village or another entity for any additional testing of the quarry."

"From our perspective, it was never suitable as a water source," he said. "You can use it for something else, just not a water source."

When asked at a news conference last week if the state's sampling would affect the public water project, the Ohio EPA said it was too early to tell.

The village of Luckey does not have a public water system, and its drinking water is sourced from private wells.

June 18, 2025

State says Luckey-area drinking water safe, radon in air high

By ALEXA YORK
BLADE STAFF WRITER

LUCKEY, Ohio -- The Ohio Environmental Protection Agency said on Wednesday that preliminary testing of well water in and around the village showed normal levels of radioactivity, but two libraries had radon gas in excess of the U.S. EPA's recommended safety limit.

The OEPA said water samples from public places in and around Luckey, including three local libraries and three Eastwood Local schools, showed levels of radioactivity no higher than what is normal and naturally occurring in the region. The samples were collected in early May and sent to GEL Laboratories, a private laboratory in South Carolina.

"We have full confidence that the water from public water systems in Luckey and Pemberville is safe to drink," said Ohio EPA Director John Logue. "When The Toledo Blade questioned the safety of the drinking water, we wanted to make sure we were doing everything we could to determine if there was reason for concern. These testing results offer peace of mind for those who live in Luckey and surrounding areas."

In contrast with results from testing by The Blade in recent months, the state did not detect any bismuth-214 or cobalt-60 at any of the nine locations. According to a news release from the state, radon was not detected in any of the water samples.

"Due to the variables involved, including collection procedure and quality control, it is impossible for Ohio EPA to know why The Toledo Blade's bismuth-214 water analysis differed significantly from Ohio EPA's results," OEPA said in a Wednesday news release, adding that it is confident in its sampling.

Radon air samples collected by OEPA at the Luckey Library and Stony Ridge Library, both branches of the Pemberville Public Library system, showed radon in air above the federal government's recommended 4.0 pCi/L safety limit. The Luckey Library detected 5.7 pCi/L of radon, while Stony Ridge Library showed 6.6 pCi/L. Radon results for the Pemberville Library came in at 3.9 pCi/L, just below the 4.0 pCi/L limit.

The EPA recommends implementing radon reduction measures when radon levels exceed 4.0 pCi/L. In response, the state said it has offered to

assist the libraries with installing radon mitigation systems and providing “support for additional testing.”

It is common for homes in Wood County to have radon in indoor air, the OEPA said. According to data from the Ohio Department of Health, the average radon levels for the Luckey ZIP code are 5.8 pCi/L.

The national average for radon in indoor air is 1.3 pCi/L, according to the EPA. At a news conference Wednesday afternoon, OEPA and ODH could not immediately answer how Luckey’s 5.8 pCi/L average compares to other Ohio counties and ZIP codes.

“Any radon level poses some health risk. While reducing radon to zero is impossible, the best approach is to lower the radon level as much as possible,” the agency said in a news release.

The testing was in response to a Blade investigation published in April that detailed how sampling by the newspaper found high levels of radioactivity in the drinking water in and around the village. Nineteen of the 39 samples collected by the newspaper from well water at homes, businesses, and public places showed levels of bismuth-214 at least 10 times higher than the Army Corps’ natural background levels.

The Blade’s testing was funded by the Pulitzer Center, a nonprofit organization offering investigative reporting grants. The newspaper hired Eurofins Environment Testing, an accredited lab in St. Louis, to analyze samples for radioactivity and other contaminants. Both Eurofins St. Louis and GEL Laboratories are accredited by the U.S. Defense Department for radioactivity analyses.

The OEPA's groundwater testing was only of locations open to the public, such as schools, libraries and churches. The Ohio Health Department said it plans to test additional “targeted” private wells.

The agency also tested radon gas at Eastwood schools when it collected water samples; those results came in low. For best results, Eastwood superintendent Brent Welker previously wrote in an email to the district, radon testing should occur during the winter months. Further testing will be performed in November to validate the spring sampling.

Sampling by The Blade and the OEPA differed in at least one key respect. The Blade testing was conducted from April, 2024, through January, providing a larger sample size in terms of seasonal variations, as fluctuations in temperature and water tables can affect radioactivity levels, particularly with radon gas. Also, groundwater moves and is often unpredictable. A water sample collected on Monday might show different results than one collected on Friday. Testing consistently over a long period of time helps limit that variable.

In contrast, OEPA testing was conducted over just a few days in May.

Amy Klei, chief of the Ohio EPA's Division of Drinking and Ground Waters, said that groundwater does not experience large changes, and that the short-term sampling was adequate to assess the public health risk.

"There can be differences from time to time, but in general, you don't expect to see large changes in levels," she said.

The radioactivity The Blade detected was primarily bismuth-214, which decays from the radioactive gas radon-222. Radiation experts agree that high levels of bismuth-214 suggest that high levels of radon are present, too. Radon exposure is the leading cause of lung cancer in nonsmokers.

The Blade testing of a hallway drinking fountain at Eastwood Middle School showed bismuth-214 10 times above normal background level; a sample from the Luckey Library was 45 times higher; and one from a water pump near athletic fields was 1,731 times higher.

Blade testing also found low levels of radioactive cobalt-60, a man-made isotope, in two wells. Detecting cobalt-60 in water is extremely rare, experts said, though it has been found in isolated instances elsewhere near nuclear facilities and radioactive waste sites.

The state said its testing detected no cobalt-60 and that The Blade's two positive samples "were likely false positives," as were two historical detections of cobalt-60 in Army Corps sampling. Both of the Army Corps' positive cobalt-60 samples were collected from off-site locations.

David Lipp, a health physics supervisor with the Ohio Department of Health, said that the cobalt-60 detects could be attributed to lab uncertainties.

“From what we understand, there was no cobalt-60 used in the area,” he said.

Multiple health physicists told The Blade that because cobalt-60 has a distinct radiation fingerprint, the results were not in error.

The newspaper shared its testing results with several experts in environmental radiation, who called for health authorities to act. In response to The Blade’s findings, federal, state, and local authorities said they would conduct a coordinated testing plan to try to confirm the newspaper's results.

For years, the Luckey site — 44 acres just north of the village, 22 miles south of Toledo — was crucial to America’s nuclear weapons program. In the 1940s, the site was home to a plant that produced magnesium metal for the Manhattan Project. In the 1950s, the plant became the government’s sole source of beryllium metal for nuclear bombs, conventional Cold War missiles, and parts for the Space Race.

Throughout those years, government and industry records show, little attention was paid to environmental issues inside and outside the plant.

The Army Corps of Engineers, which has been removing tons of contaminated soil from the Cold War site for the past seven years, has maintained that pollution is not moving into residential areas and affecting the drinking water. As evidence, they cite thousands of their own soil samples taken at the site in recent years that detected no cobalt-60; the agency has never tested radon or bismuth-214

June 23, 2025

Experts weigh in on Luckey water testing

By ALEXA YORK
BLADE STAFF WRITER

LUCKEY, Ohio — When The Blade recently tested drinking water in this former Cold War weapons town, results showed high levels of radioactivity.

Experts who reviewed The Blade's results said the findings suggested potential risk to local residents. The Ohio EPA followed up with its own testing, saying its reports showed normal levels of naturally occurring radioactivity. The water, OEPA said, was safe.

"I am happy public testing turned out fine, but we need more," said Luckey-area resident Karina Hahn-Claydon.

Norman Kleiman, an environmental scientist at Columbia University, agreed that more investigation is needed. He suggested that a third lab be used, one independent of both OEPA and The Blade.

"Given the wide discrepancies in the values reached by the different laboratories, a decent approach would be to use a reputable third-party laboratory," he said. "That's what we do in science, right?"

The labs selected by each are comparable: OEPA used GEL Laboratories in South Carolina, while The Blade used Eurofins St. Louis in Missouri. Both are accredited by the U.S. Department of Defense for radioactivity analyses, and the same EPA-approved test methods were used.

The state's testing was in response to a Blade investigation published in April that detailed how sampling by the newspaper found high levels of radioactivity in the drinking water in and around the village of Luckey. Nineteen of the 39 samples collected by the newspaper from well water at homes, businesses, and public places showed levels of bismuth-214 at least 10 times higher than the Army Corps' natural background levels.

It's unclear why results of The Blade's water testing and the state sampling differed so greatly, and the OEPA said on Wednesday that it was "impossible to know." But a look at both testing efforts, as well as some of the variables involved, offers some clues.

First, each set of samples has different strengths and drawbacks. The OEPA tested water at nine locations over one day in May, while The Blade tested 39 wells over nine months. OEPA ran more tests at each

location, providing more complete sampling data for those wells. While The Blade tested more locations, its sampling was focused on radioactivity.

Groundwater flow, in contrast with public water systems, is another factor affecting sample results. OEPA's Division of Drinking and Ground Waters chief Amy Klei said on Wednesday that because groundwater does not experience large changes, it is unlikely OEPA's results would change over time.

"There can be differences from time to time, but in general, you don't expect to see large changes in levels," she said at a news conference announcing the results.

But groundwater movement depends on local geology, according to Todd Halihan, a hydrogeologist at Oklahoma State University.

He said the bedrock formations underlying Luckey appeared to be Silurian Lockport Dolomite and Greenfield Dolomite, forming a carbonate aquifer that supplies drinking water.

"My concern in sampling this type of aquifer is that carbonate aquifers can be strongly influenced by storm events," Mr. Halihan said. "You would need to understand the variability in chemistry over time in most of these types of aquifers, instead of relying on a single sampling event."

Previous Army Corps data supports this: In a 2001 groundwater report, the Corps' modeling indicated that groundwater elevations in Luckey "can vary significantly on an annual basis."

While the OEPA did not detect radon in water, two libraries showed radon air samples above the U.S. EPA's recommended 4.0 pCi/L limit. The Luckey Library detected 5.7 pCi/L of radon, while Stony Ridge Library showed 6.6 pCi/L. The Pemberville Library came in at 3.9 pCi/L, just below the 4.0 pCi/L limit.

It is common for homes in Wood County to have radon in indoor air, the OEPA said. According to data from the Ohio Department of Health, the average radon levels for the Luckey ZIP code are 5.8 pCi/L, more than four times the national average of 1.3 pCi/L. The Blade has requested data on Ohio's other radon averages from OEPA and ODH.

In response to the elevated radon levels, the state said it will assist the libraries with installing radon mitigation systems and providing “support for additional testing.”

Pemberville Public Library system director Ariel Jacobs said she was pleased that the water results were deemed safe by the state. “However,” she said, “we are unable to comment on the OEPA’s published test results regarding our radon testing while we navigate with them to determine our next steps.”

Blade testing also found low levels of radioactive cobalt-60, a man-made radioactive form of normal cobalt, in two wells. A follow-up test at one of the two wells did not detect cobalt-60. OEPA did not detect cobalt-60 at any of its nine locations. Experts said that detecting cobalt-60 in water is extremely rare, though it has been found in isolated instances elsewhere near nuclear facilities and radioactive waste sites.

OEPA agreed that The Blade’s detections of cobalt-60 were “highly abnormal” but said on Wednesday it believes them to be false positives.

John Hageman is a retired health physicist from the Southwest Research Institute in Texas, where he served as its radiation safety officer and principal scientist. He specializes in industrial radiation, which includes cobalt-60.

A “deep dive” would be needed, Mr. Hageman said, to determine why — or if — the original cobalt-60 readings might be false positives. This would take an expert in isotope analysis and instrumentation.

“The data and instruments used should tell the story,” Mr. Hageman said.

For years, the Luckey site — 44 acres just north of the village, 22 miles south of Toledo — was crucial to America’s nuclear weapons program. In the 1940s, the site was home to a plant that produced magnesium metal for the Manhattan Project. In the 1950s, the plant became the government’s sole source of beryllium metal for nuclear bombs, conventional Cold War missiles, and parts for the Space Race.

Throughout those years, government and industry records show, little attention was paid to environmental issues inside and outside the plant.

The Army Corps of Engineers, which has been removing tons of contaminated soil from the Cold War site for the past seven years, has maintained that pollution is not moving into residential areas and affecting the drinking water.

Former Luckey resident Alexandra Evans said she was not surprised by the state's results but wondered whether they could be repeated.

"I'd like to see them repeat the same strategy that was applied the first time," she said.

Luckey Mayor Cory Panning wrote in an email Friday that he has no concerns about the varying results or the quality of the groundwater.

"I have full confidence in the Ohio EPA and Ohio Department of Health in the testing that was conducted, which was completed in a safe, controlled, and scientific manner," he said.

No further sampling of public locations is planned, OEPA told The Blade on Wednesday. ODH said it will sample a "select number" of private wells in the coming days.

July 12, 2025

Beryllium health experts offer concerns about Luckey site

By ALEXA YORK
BLADE STAFF WRITER

LUCKEY, Ohio — Two leading beryllium health experts say they are concerned that toxic beryllium dust may linger in and around the village, raising the possibility of harmful exposures.

A government-owned beryllium plant in Luckey shut in 1960, but the high levels of contamination at the facility did not become public knowledge until decades later.

“From a physician standpoint, I’m still very concerned about the people who worked there, who were involved in the cleanup, as well as the community,” Dr. Lisa Maier, a pulmonologist who specializes in beryllium disease, said.

Dr. Maier heads the beryllium program at National Jewish Hospital in Denver. The hospital has more experience diagnosing and treating chronic beryllium disease — a potentially fatal lung illness — than any other in the world.

Chronic beryllium disease is usually found in workers who machine, grind, or sand the metal, but cases have been documented in residents living near beryllium facilities. In 2008, Dr. Maier and her colleagues published a study on community-acquired beryllium disease near a facility in Reading, Pa.

“What we know from work that we’ve done, not just at Reading but at other facilities, was that workers took home exposures,” she said. “We know that happened. We know that that happened in relatively recent years.”

Lisa Barker, who manages the beryllium and metals programs at National Jewish, said the similarities between the Luckey and Reading facilities suggest that the potential for beryllium exposure still exists.

“Those are exposures that if they’re in the air, they’re going to settle somewhere. It would be someone’s home, in their yard, in their car. We certainly heard about those kinds of situations,” Dr. Maier said.

And as remediation is happening in facilities, she said, there is a risk for the workers and reintroducing beryllium and other substances.

A Blade investigation published in April detailed how authorities, for decades, repeatedly misled workers and the public about the dangers at the Luckey site. Throughout those years, records show, little attention was paid to environmental issues both inside and outside the plant.

“We know that there were very high exposures at this facility,” Dr. Maier said of the Luckey plant. “Much, much higher than those allowed in current facilities, and much, much higher than those allowed at Department of Energy facilities since the early 2000s.”

Because many physicians are not trained to recognize beryllium disease, Dr. Maier said, it can be misdiagnosed as sarcoidosis or other lung illnesses if the patient does not have a history of known beryllium exposure.

Beryllium is an exceptionally strong and lightweight metal with unusual properties. Its high thermal and electrical conductivity, as well as its transparency to X-rays and ability to generate neutrons, make it a valuable material in the defense, aerospace, and electronics industries.

In solid metal form, beryllium does not pose a health hazard. But when the metal is machined, ground, or sanded and its particles become airborne, a portion of individuals become sensitized to beryllium, similar to an allergic reaction. Many people sensitized to beryllium will go on to develop the disease, sometimes decades later.

“These aren’t exposures like asbestos,” Dr. Maier said. “It’s more like an exposure to air pollution, where you can have low levels for many years that puts people at risk.”

Unlike many occupational diseases, beryllium disease is not connected to the level of exposure and can occur after brief exposures to small amounts. Cases of beryllium disease have been recorded in residents living around beryllium facilities since the late 1940s, but Luckey has not been studied.

For years, the Luckey site — 44 acres just north of the village, 22 miles south of Toledo — was crucial to America’s nuclear weapons program. In the 1940s, the site was home to a plant that produced magnesium metal for the Manhattan Project. In the 1950s, the plant became the government’s sole source of beryllium metal for nuclear bombs, conventional Cold War missiles, and parts for the Space Race.

The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers has managed the Cold War cleanup program since 1997 and began removing contaminated soil from the Luckey site in 2018. As of May, the agency has removed more than 300,000 tons of soil from the property containing roughly 200 tons of beryllium. The soil is trucked to a licensed facility in Michigan for disposal.

“Since 2018, the Corps of Engineers has been safely conducting remediation at the Luckey project, prioritizing the safety of workers, the public, and the environment,” Army Corps spokesman Avery Schneider wrote in an email.

“Remediation activities are carefully managed to minimize airborne emissions, and air monitoring data from the site perimeter has always remained below the regulatory limit for beryllium throughout the project’s duration,” Mr. Schneider said.

The Army Corps consults National Jewish on beryllium health matters, Mr. Schneider said, but the hospital has no active role in the cleanup.

The federal cleanup program, the Formerly Utilized Sites Remedial Action Program, or FUSRAP, does not have a community health component. The Corps is responsible for cleaning up certain contaminants related to early atomic weapons work, and sampling is generally limited to the property boundaries.

“Nobody’s really measuring anything outside the fence, and we know that the potential for exposure outside the fence is there,” Ms. Barker said.

The Ohio EPA, the lead regulatory agency responsible for off-site beryllium contamination, did not directly answer a written question from The Blade about whether the public could still be exposed to beryllium dust that may have migrated off-site since the plant began production in 1949.

“The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (USACE) is the lead agency for the cleanup and is performing air monitoring at the site. For any additional questions related to dust associated with the cleanup, please reach out to USACE. Questions regarding potential dust distribution during the facility's operation should be directed to the Department of Energy (DOE). Because USACE is the lead agency at the site, Ohio EPA does not conduct its own air monitoring,” OEPA spokesman Katie Boyer wrote in an email.

Millbury resident Ron Wolsiffer recalled his mother working at the Luckey site from the 1970s to the 1990s, when the government no longer

owned the property but beryllium dust from Cold War weapons work remained. He said the workers were not fully informed of the risks.

“I just want someone to be held accountable,” Mr. Wolsiffer said. “The contamination at the Luckey, Ohio, plant wasn’t a secret. Someone knew, and someone chose silence over safety.”

Mr. Wolsiffer's mother died in March, he said, and had been diagnosed with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease and pulmonary fibrosis. He said he did not have evidence that her illness was related to her employment, but he thought that the workers' potential for exposure should be investigated.

For people concerned about possible exposures, National Jewish said it’s important to understand beryllium’s health effects, share the information with family members, and bring up any respiratory symptoms with their provider.

“I would just remind folks that the Cleveland Clinic is not too far away. We can also be reached by phone or on our website,” Dr. Maier said.

Sept. 11, 2025

Ohio Department of Health says test results show drinking water safe in Luckey

BLADE STAFF

LUCKEY, Ohio — Independent testing of five private water wells in Luckey found the water safe to drink, according to results by the Ohio Department of Health.

The results released Wednesday showed the systems met all Ohio and federal safe drinking water standards, the health department said.

The testing was in response to a Blade investigation published in April that detailed how sampling by the newspaper found high levels of radioactivity in the drinking water in and around the village.

Nineteen of the 39 samples collected by the newspaper from well water at homes, businesses, and public places showed levels of bismuth-214 at least 10 times higher than the Army Corps of Engineers' natural background levels.

The Blade testing of a hallway drinking fountain at Eastwood Middle School, for instance, showed bismuth-214 10 times above the normal background level; a sample from the Luckey Library was 45 times higher; and one from a water pump near athletic fields was 1,731 times higher.

Blade testing also found low levels of radioactive cobalt-60, a man-made isotope, in two wells. Detecting cobalt-60 in water is extremely rare, experts said, though it has been found in isolated instances elsewhere near nuclear facilities and radioactive waste sites.

The village was once home to a processing plant for highly toxic beryllium metal for nuclear bombs and other weapons.

It was one of the most critical defense sites in the nation and now is one of the most toxic, according to The Blade investigation.

The Ohio Department of Health contracted with Tetra Tech to collect samples from five private systems in different areas of the village of Luckey. The samples were analyzed by Alliance Technical Group of Akron, which is certified by the Ohio Environmental Protection agency for drinking water analysis.

Alliance Technical Group looked for 24 contaminants. The laboratory identified no beryllium, bismuth-214, cobalt-60, or radium 226 in any of the samples, the news release stated. Radon gas was detected in two of the five samples but at levels that were far less than what is considered unsafe.

The Ohio EPA, which oversees public water systems, in June announced that the results of its sampling of nine public drinking water systems in Luckey and Pemberville found the systems had met all safe drinking water standards.

May 1, 2025

Editorial

Transparent testing required for site

THE BLADE EDITORIAL BOARD

Extensive independent tests of drinking water in Luckey, drawn from public and private wells, show levels of radioactivity that demand new air, water, and soil testing that can be trusted by the state and federal government.

It's an issue that goes all the way back to the nuclear Manhattan Project of World War II and the Cold War nuclear weapons production program that followed.

Blade reporter Alexa York, a native of Luckey, found mounds of evidencedetailing buried radioactive material at the 44-acre site where beryllium for U.S. nuclear missiles was produced.

The water tests were commissioned by The Blade.

Those now declassified records also show real-time government denials of the known dangers followed by decades of benign neglect.

Based on her irrefutable documents and three water samples that showed elevated levels of radioactivity in Luckey, the Pulitzer Center provided funds for more comprehensive tests.

The results have forced the Ohio EPA and Ohio Department of Health to conduct tests at Eastwood High School, Middle School, and Elementary School for contamination.

The Blade's water test at Eastwood Middle School showed radioactivity 10 times greater than the norm. The presence of radioactivity in the water indicates the likely presence of radon in the air and soil.

Radon is the most serious threat for lung cancer that nonsmokers face and radiation presents danger of blood and thyroid cancer as well if overexposed.

Levels with radioactivity 45 times higher than normal were detected at the Luckey library and 1,731 times normal at an athletic field.

Numbers like that demand a thorough and definitive state and federal investigation on the extent danger in the water, the air, and the soil in this Wood County village of just over 1,000 people.

Despite The Blade's results, produced by a reputable firm, when asked for a comment, the Ohio EPA said that "all levels remain well within state and federal drinking water standards."

Since 1992, the beryllium plant grounds have been designated as a special federal cleanup site because of the "extremely high excess lifetime cancer risk" contained in the soil.

The Army Corps of Engineers has been removing tons of soil from the site for the past seven years and says the contamination has not crossed into residential soil or water.

That assertion must be scrupulously tested by Ohio environment and health officials who will need to share their data with independent experts to provide credibility.

The Blade investigation was launched only because Ms. York documented a long pattern of official government lies on the dangers connected to the "bomb factory," as it is known to local residents.

Months of door-to-door discussions with Luckey residents prompted many to open their homes to water samples, despite the well considered fear that results likely to validate health concerns would hurt property values.

It's a moral imperative not to endanger school kids in the Eastwood district or Luckey residents.

If there are financial consequences from findings of water, air, and soil tests indicating dangers inherent in the weapons program rippled

beyond the factory into the neighboring community, they should be mitigated through federal government responsibility for the problem.

May 5, 2025

Editorial

Legacy of lies

THE BLADE EDITORIAL BOARD

Winston Churchill said “in wartime, truth is so precious that she should always be attended by a bodyguard of lies.” The legacy of Luckey as a World War II and Cold War weapon production site is truth as the first casualty.

In addition to processing dangerous beryllium metal for nuclear bombs and other weapons, the federal government used Luckey as a site to bury plutonium and radioactive debris from other federal sites.

The Blade’s Alexa York details many instances of government deception on the safety risks in Luckey, drawn directly from federal records once classified but now hiding in plain sight in government archives. (“Deception and neglect,” Sunday)

Because of Ms. York’s diligent digging in those files, uncovering the use of Luckey as a dumping ground for waste beyond that created by the beryllium plant, the Pulitzer Center paid for independent water testing there.

The results indicate higher than normal levels of radioactivity, which suggests the presence of cancer-causing radon in the air and soil.

The Ohio EPA has been conducting water tests in Luckey but says The Blade results are within the state and federal standards for safe drinking water.

Beyond that cursory statement, no state or federal agency would discuss with Ms. York why the known danger of the Luckey site was ignored for many years after the site was abandoned.

The federal government has much to atone for based on the discrepancies between facts in the archived federal documents and news releases, statements, and advertisements they made regarding the Luckey plant.

When concerns over beryllium were raised the federal government claimed the most modern ventilation would be installed in the plant. Instead they used old ductwork.

When the plant was closed and the feds wanted to sell the site, they took out ads claiming contamination had been mostly removed.

In truth the government considered the site “worthless” because of extensive contamination, and it might be best to bury the entire facility.

The government did nothing for three decades until starting a cleanup of tainted soil in 1999 that continues to this day.

Clearly the safety and health of Luckey residents are a low priority for the federal government and has been since they arrived in 1942.

Rather than provide these citizens the respect they deserve and quickly clean the contaminated site when the urgency of an existential war had passed, the government lied repeatedly about the danger they left behind in Luckey.

Churchill said, “Truth is incontrovertible. Panic may resent it. Ignorance may deride it. Malice may distort it.

“But there it is.”

Government deception and delay on environmental hazards in Luckey is exposed. Finishing the cleanup should proceed with urgency.

June 26, 2025

Editorial

Luckey water test incomplete

THE BLADE EDITORIAL BOARD

The Ohio Environmental Protection Agency has tested water in Luckey and reports normal levels of radioactivity. “We have full confidence that the water from public water systems in Luckey and Pemberville is safe to drink,” said Ohio EPA Director John Logue.

The state EPA tested that water because The Blade conducted 39 water draws between April, 2024 and January and the results from 19 samples showed high levels of radioactivity in the drinking water. The unsafe levels uncovered by Eurofins Environmental Testing of St. Louis came from drinking water in homes, businesses, and public buildings.

The Ohio EPA sampled well water from public buildings over two days in May but concludes that’s enough because groundwater does not experience large changes so short term tests are enough to establish safety.

But independent experts say multiple groundwater tests are needed when geology points to changing conditions. Those exact conditions were detailed in 2001 by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, then on site in Luckey to clean up contamination left behind by the “bomb factory” that played a part in the creation of the nation’s nuclear arsenal from World War II through the Cold War.

“Groundwater elevations can vary significantly on an annual basis,” the Army Engineers wrote. Based on that, sound practice would suggest the need for multiple tests to follow the water through all the ground it is exposed to.

Moreover, the litany of lies told to Luckey residents over the course of 80 years, deceptions uncovered in declassified federal government documents, demand the highest level of scrutiny rather that a quick, cursory, nothing-to-see-here conclusion.

The Pulitzer Center provided an investigative reporting grant to pay for testing based on dozens of documents from government archives detailing how known safety hazards related to the nuclear weapons plant in Luckey were concealed with deliberate deceptions.

Blade reporter Alexa York, who uncovered these documents, got citizens of Luckey to open their homes for water tests. Her samples from Eastwood Middle School and the Luckey Library showed high radioactivity in the water.

The Ohio Department of Health says it will soon be taking residential water samples in Luckey. That's good but not good enough.

Both the state EPA and ODH should commit to following the water through all four seasons with a comprehensive testing program. Because The Blade's water tests establish that results may vary, Ohio owes it to the residents of Luckey to stay on the task long enough to account for the seasonal variance noted by the Army Corps of Engineers.

It casts no aspersions on the tests by the state of Ohio to demand that they take full account of the sad history of government assurances to the people of Luckey and proceed with a process that leaves no question that a complete and thorough investigation has been conducted.

The Luckey water safety investigation is just getting started if Ohio plans to do it right.