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HARDING TWP. – The Great Swamp Watershed Association (GSWSA) now has the backing of the township in its effort to get the federal government to cap, rather than relocate the contents of a local Superfund landfill.

The Township Committee met on Monday, July 9, and unanimously agreed to a resolution which supports the watershed's recommendation to the federal Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) that the Rolling Knolls landfill, located off Britten Road, in both Chatham Township and Harding, should be capped.

The resolution calls on the EPA to consolidate landfill material into a centralized location on the site, and cap it with on-site materials.

In the July 3 letter to the state Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), Harding makes the case for capping the landfill and leaving the material there.

"Removing the landfill materials will increase truck traffic on the roads within Harding Township, roads that are not designed for the weight and frequency that would be necessary to remove decades of dumping at this landfill," the letter states. "Hazardous materials may leak toxic fluids from the trucks that are hauling mechanical and other types of materials, which will pose unnecessary health risks to the general public."

Before a vote was taken, township resident Julia Somers, who serves as the executive director of the N.J. Highlands Coalition, explained the dilemma, and the reason why Harding's support is vital.

"This is a Superfund site. The EPA will clean it up, but they want to truck it all out. They are talking about removing hundreds of loads," she said.

Stay On Site

Somers said the other option, which the watershed association supports, is to contain the landfill on site to avoid moving it through Harding Township.

The Rolling Knolls Landfill is a landfill located in the Green Village section of Chatham Township and Harding. It is bordered on two sides by the Great Swamp National Wildlife Refuge, and was formerly known as Miele's Dump, after owner Robert Miele.

The landfill has been identified by the EPA as a Superfund site. It was operated as a municipal landfill from the early 1930s until December 1968, during which time it handled municipal solid waste, as well as construction and demolition debris from neighboring communities.

According to the EPA's web site, soil samples collected in 1999 showed levels of metals, phthalates, and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) that were above maximum regulation limits.

Mercury and PCB releases were also observed in a surface water and sediment sample taken from a portion of the landfill located within the Great Swamp Wildlife Refuge, according to the EPA. Testing also showed "actual contamination of a terrestrial sensitive environment," and indicated potential exposure of nearby residents, the EPA said.

"Some 30 acres are located in the Great Swamp refuge. It's a category one hazardous waste site according to the Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), and the EPA has it registered as a Super Fund site," Somers said. "For years, nothing happened. Now, they want to fix it. Knolls is one they think they can move along quickly on, and they want to be finished by the end of September."

The N.J. Fish and Game Division, Somers said, has indicated that one can walk around the site and clearly see waste lying around.

"They (Fish and Game) would also prefer that a big hole is dug, that the hot spots are cleaned, and that very little should be carried off site," she said. "If they truck it out, no one knows at this point what the route will be, and whether it will go through Harding or Chatham Township. If they pick the Fish and Wildlife remedy, you will have a safe and attractive site."

She said that so far the EPA has rejected requests not to truck the contents. The Highlands Coalition and the GSWA support Fish & Game's solution.

"We are asking Harding Township to support the Great Swamp and we will ask Chatham Township and Long Hill to do the same," she said. "The EPA really does respect your opinions. Your views really count."

She said that installing fencing is another option, as is doing nothing.

"Fish and Wildlife favors just capping it with clay," she said.

Township Engineer Paul Fox said moving that much waste and disturbing the site would bring about its own set of problems. Building a clay cap, he said, would likely be preferable. The trucks, the material that would spill from them and potential pollution are just some of the problems.