

# Halliburton Water Contamination

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Eighty-seven residents of Duncan, Okla., are suing energy giant Halliburton Co., its subsidiary Halliburton Energy Services Inc. and SAIC Energy, Environmental and Infrastructure LLC (formerly The Benham Companies LLC).

Their suit alleges they were harmed by decades-long consumption of well-water contaminated with toxic wastes from a nearby rocket-motor recycling operation (docket CJ-2011-A51-W, District Court, Cleveland County, Okla.).

According to the complaint, filed Oct. 31, Halliburton is also alleged to have exposed the plaintiffs to radioactive contamination.

The plaintiffs are represented by the New York-based mass tort and personal injury litigation law firm Weitz & Luxenberg PC and by Homsey, Cooper, Hill and Carson of Oklahoma City.

They allege in their court filing that the defendants failed to prevent soil and water contamination at and near the rocket-motor recycling facility, that the company did not properly monitor the situation once it became aware of the contamination, and that it did not inform the community about the pollution.

“A high incidence of thyroid dysfunction has been found among the plaintiffs, and many of their children have developmental problems as a result of the contamination,” says Todd Ommen, a Weitz & Luxenberg attorney handling the case.

One such plaintiff is a 31-year-old mother repeatedly hospitalized for hyperthyroidism and related problems that at one point produced a brush with death from sepsis. The complaint reveals that her thyroid troubles began when she was 12. It goes on to state that the woman obtained water for drinking, cooking, cleaning, bathing, gardening and recreation from wells on her property and that she is today infertile and suffering from severely abnormal menstrual cycles. The complaint indicates that her son, now 11, was born prematurely and has asthma.

## Underground Perchlorate Plume

The complaint contends that the cause of the health problems of the woman, her son and the other plaintiffs stems from operations conducted by Halliburton at the rocket-engine recycling facility along Osage Road on Duncan’s north side.

This past August, in communications with Oklahoma environmental regulators, Halliburton admitted its activities at the site created a subterranean plume of perchlorate contamination affecting at least 18 residential wells on nearby properties, the complaint states.

Ammonium perchlorate “is extremely soluble in water, and mobile in the environment —migrating quickly from soil to groundwater,” the court filing alleges. “It is also very stable and can persist in groundwater for decades” and can show up in groundwater as both nitrates and perchlorate.

Perchlorate is not currently known to cause cancer, but it can disrupt thyroid production of hormones necessary for growth and development, and it can interfere with metabolism in both children and adults as well as impact adult mental function, the complaint discloses.

“When ingested, perchlorate blocks the transport of iodide from the blood into the thyroid gland,” the filing states, adding that iodide uptake is essential for thyroid health and that a healthy thyroid produces hormones which help regulate body metabolism and oxygen consumption. “Deficient iodide uptake can lead to a variety of health problems including infertility, fatigue, speech

disorder, joint pain, obesity, goiter, enlarged thyroid gland, inability to concentrate and depression. In extreme cases, it can produce deafness, heart failure and coma.”

## **Facility Cited for Violations**

The plaintiffs allege that Halliburton used its Osage Road facility from 1965 to 1992 as a site for refurbishing spent rocket motors. The process of readying the motors included washing leftover propellant from combustion chambers —the propellant consisted mainly of ammonium perchlorate, they argue.

The ammonium perchlorate-laced wastewater ended up in a nearby evaporation pond, and from there entered surrounding soils and groundwater before eventually contaminating the affected wells, the suit charges.

Additionally, after being hosed out, some portion of the unconsumed propellant from each motor was set afire in burn pits —a procedure that left behind contaminated ash which also found its way into the soils and drinking water supply, the complaint alleges.

The complaint notes that Halliburton was cited by the Oklahoma State Department of Health for failing to address a number of the environmental problems at the facility.

Further, Halliburton —as part of a facility closure and cleanup plan it implemented —promised to conduct soil sampling and groundwater monitoring, but failed to test groundwater for a period of approximately four years and did not test for perchlorate off-site until about 2010, the court filing contends.

## **Radiation Contamination Alleged**

The complaint also alleges that Halliburton may have exposed residents of nearby homes to radioactive contamination.

Specifically, it states that, beginning in late 1983, the company began accepting spent fuel racks from a Nebraska nuclear reactor. These were then cut into pieces and shipped to out-of-state disposal sites. The complaint describes a surprise inspection of the operation by the Nuclear Regulatory Commission, which found numerous safety violations. Elevated radiation levels at the site persist to this day, the complaint alleges.

With a population of about 23,000, the city of Duncan —seat of Stephens County —is ringed by a quartet of lakes, but many Duncan residents get their drinking water from wells, including those tainted by perchlorate.

Ironically, Duncan is the birthplace of Halliburton. The company was founded there by Erle P. Halliburton, who early in the 20th Century devised a way to build better oil wells and, in the process, make oil production more cost-effective. A statute in tribute to Erle Halliburton dominates a corner of the city’s Memorial Park.