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ENVIRONMENT

Illinois failed to take action even though it knew 3M had been polluting the Mississippi River with forever chemicals for more than a decade

By Michael Hawthorne
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3M's Cordova chemical plant on the Mississippi River upstream from the Quad Cities is seen Dec. 7, 2022. The company dumps highly toxic PFAS chemicals into the river. (E. Jason Wambsgans / Chicago Tribune)

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By the late 2000s, it was clear that forever chemicals were in the blood of nearly every American.

Alarmed by the threats to public health, Minnesota officials pressured 3M to [dramatically reduce pollution](#) released into the Mississippi River at its manufacturing plant southeast of Minneapolis-St. Paul, where the global conglomerate pioneered the [highly toxic, almost indestructible chemicals](#) after World War II.



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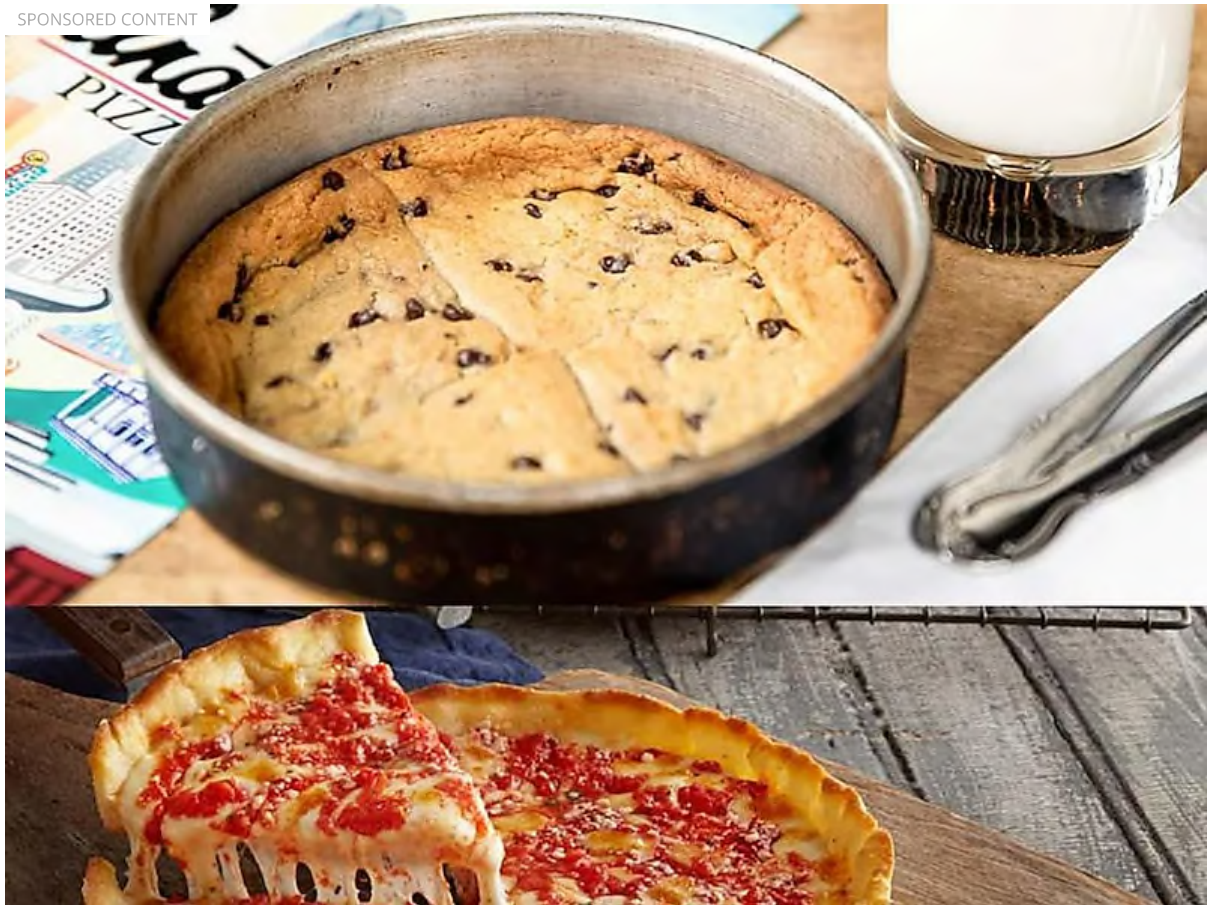
In Alabama, a state known for its lax environmental laws, lawsuits prodded 3M to [begin limiting pollution](#) and cleaning up contaminated sites near another plant where it makes forever chemicals, also known as per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS.

But for more than a decade state regulators in Illinois failed time and time again to hold 3M accountable for air and water pollution from its third PFAS plant in the United States, located on the Mississippi about 15 miles upstream from the Quad Cities.

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Illinois officials knew about pollution problems at 3M's Cordova plant as early as 2008, a Chicago Tribune investigation has found. The federal government, by law the nation's chief protector of human health and the environment, failed to investigate despite well-documented hazards in other communities where forever chemicals are made.

The harmful consequences are just becoming clear.

Worrisome concentrations of forever chemicals have been found in drinking water in the Quad Cities and two dozen other river communities in [Illinois](#) and [Iowa](#). All told, nearly 20 million Americans depend on the Mississippi for their drinking water. Most live downstream from 3M's Cordova plant in northwest Illinois.

"It's difficult to comprehend how devastating this could be for people in the Mississippi watershed and for the river's ecosystem," said David Cwierty, an engineering professor and director of the [Center for Health Effects of Environmental Contamination](#) at the University of Iowa.

Some forever chemicals [build up in human blood](#), take years to leave the body and cause [cancer and other diseases](#). Two of the most studied PFAS are so toxic there is effectively [no safe level of exposure](#), the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency declared in June after reviewing the latest research.

There are other signs the chemicals have spread well beyond 3M's property in Cordova. Contractors hired by the company found at least two PFAS in three of eight public water systems and 68 of 72 private wells tested in Illinois and Iowa during the summer, according to company spreadsheets shared with the U.S. EPA.

The most alarming levels were detected on the Illinois side of the river, where concentrations of one PFAS in private wells were up to 6,250 times higher than the EPA's latest [health advisory](#), intended to highlight when a lifetime of exposure to the chemical in drinking water could trigger health problems.

Levels of two other forever chemicals in Illinois and Iowa drinking water also far exceeded federal guidelines, the 3M testing found.

Under an [agreement with the EPA](#) announced last month, agency officials will oversee an expansion of 3M's surveillance to water utilities up to 10 miles away from the chemical plant and in the Quad Cities, the region's population center. Private wells within 4 miles of the plant will be sampled as well.

It marked the first time the EPA has [weighed in publicly](#) about the Cordova plant. About 300,000 people in Illinois and Iowa live within the area targeted for expanded water testing.

[[Forever chemicals: They're in your drinking water and likely your food. Read the Tribune investigation](#)]

3M is offering in-home water treatment systems to people on well water within 3 miles of the PFAS plant and working to ensure the closest community, Camanche, Iowa, has clean water.

Wastewater from the plant will be treated with a system 3M installed in October that is expected to reduce the amount of PFAS dumped into the Mississippi by 95% when fully operational, a company spokesman said in an email.

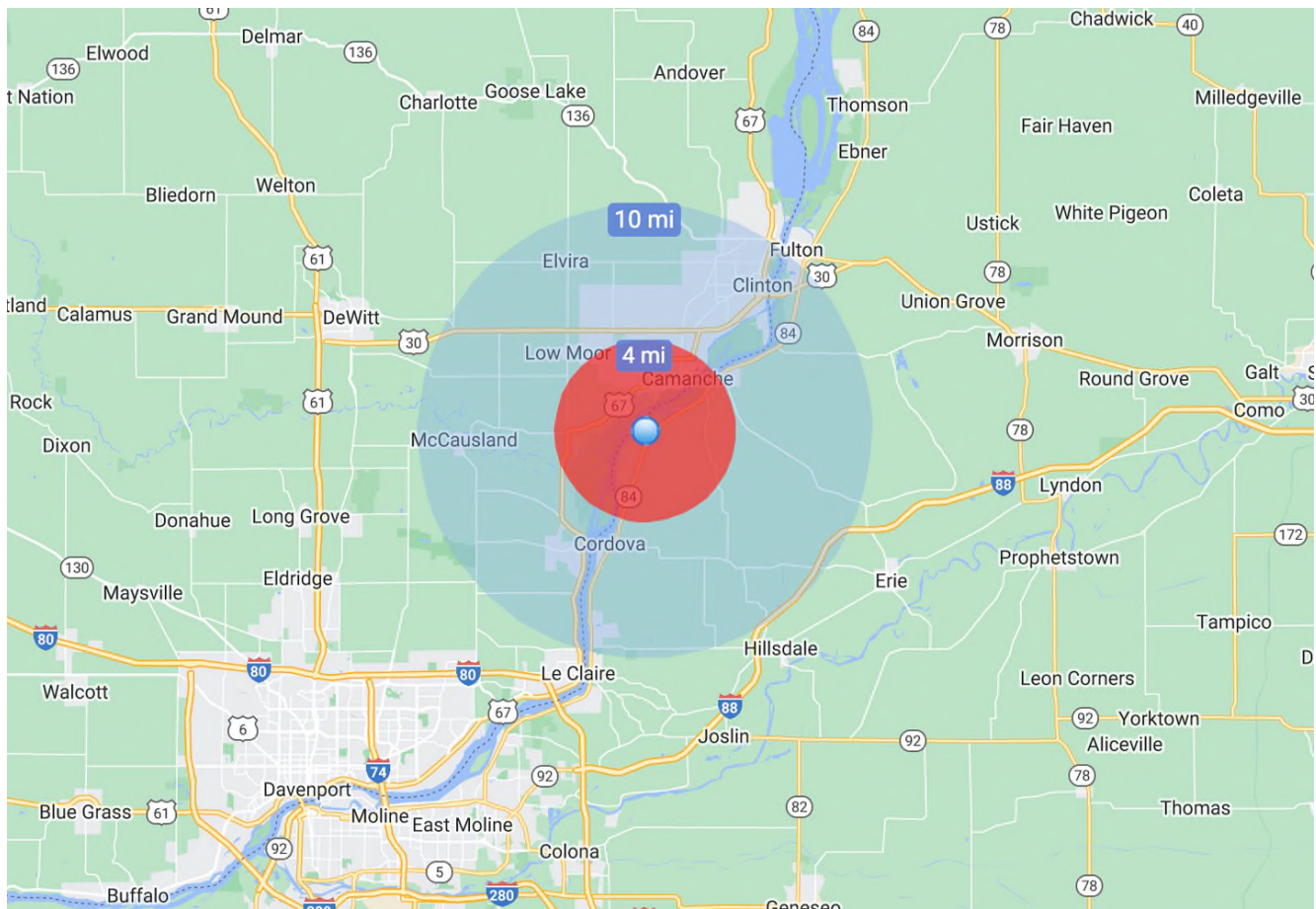
"We remain committed to working with communities and regulators ... to address these important issues," 3M said in a statement responding to questions from the Tribune. "We want to work with our neighbors to help address their questions and help them understand how we are driving progress on this topic."



Andrew Kida, city administrator in Camanche, Iowa, appears outside a well house in the town that sits upstream from 3M's Cordova chemical plant on the Mississippi River on Dec. 7, 2022. Camanche's water is contaminated with PFAS and the EPA has ordered 3M to work with the city to obtain a safe source of drinking water. (E. Jason Wambsgans / Chicago Tribune)

The company has long argued PFAS aren't harmful at levels found in people. Its statement did not answer questions about why 3M waited until now to upgrade the Cordova plant, which has been discharging PFAS into one of the nation's major waterways and emitting the chemicals into the air without limits since the company began producing them at its Illinois outpost in 1975.

"People are concerned, to say the least," said Andrew Kida, the Camanche city administrator. Though the city is 2 miles upstream from the Cordova plant, the EPA said air pollution from 3M likely settled over time and contaminated wells that provide drinking water to 4,570 people.



The EPA will oversee an expansion of 3M's surveillance to water utilities up to 10 miles away — marked in blue — from the chemical plant and in the Quad Cities. Private wells within 4 miles of the plant — marked in red — will be sampled as well.

Little, if any, oversight

One of the reasons why it took years to get to this point: Forever chemicals aren't regulated by the federal government.

Since the early 2000s it has largely been left to [trial lawyers](#) to pry [industry studies](#) and other records from PFAS manufacturers and seek payment and restitution for damages caused by the chemicals.

Once-secret [3M documents](#) unearthed during previous lawsuits show top executives knew about the harmful effects of PFAS as early as the 1950s, when the company began mass-producing perfluorooctane sulfonic acid (PFOS) to make Scotchgard, a widely used stain repellent, and selling perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA) to DuPont to manufacture Teflon coatings for cookware, clothing and wiring.

In 1976, a year after 3M began making forever chemicals at Cordova, the company's scientists found plant workers had a PFAS marker in their blood at levels [up to 50 times higher](#) than what 3M considered normal.

3M and DuPont no longer make PFOS or PFOA, nor do other manufacturers in the United States. But the chemicals don't break down naturally and are routinely found in drinking water worldwide.

Scotchgard and Teflon feature different versions of PFAS today. Some are [just as dangerous](#), if not [more so](#), than PFOA and PFOS, scientists are finding.

Replacements for the original formulations can be found in products such as carpets, clothing, cosmetics, dental floss, fast-food wrappers, firefighting foam, food packaging, lubricants, microwave popcorn bags, paper plates, pizza boxes, rain jackets and ski wax.

[[Forever chemicals found in drinking water throughout Illinois: Search the database](#)]

The EPA declined requests for an interview with Administrator Michael Regan, who in September proposed listing PFOA and PFOS as [hazardous substances](#) under federal law. The proposal is part of a [broader agenda](#) outlined by the Biden administration to impose legally enforceable limits on the chemicals in drinking water, begin cleaning up contaminated areas, and require studies of newer PFAS that have been introduced to the marketplace with little, if any, oversight.

“As we work to develop additional resources to address PFAS contamination,” the agency said in an email, “we will continue to work alongside our state partners to take swift action, hold polluters accountable and protect the health of communities across this country.”

If the Biden EPA follows through on promises in its [PFAS Strategic Roadmap](#), the agency would do far more than any action taken on the chemicals during the Bush, Obama and Trump presidencies.

“We had to make our case without any help from (the U.S. EPA),” said Lori Swanson, a former Minnesota attorney general who [sued 3M](#) over PFAS pollution in 2010 and eight years later won an \$850 million [legal settlement](#) for clean water projects in the company’s home state. “The fact they felt the need to step in (in Illinois) is noteworthy.”

‘Imminent and substantial endangerment’

During most of the years Minnesota engaged in a public process scrutinizing and suing 3M, records obtained by the Tribune show the Illinois EPA quietly deferred time and time again to the company regarding the Cordova plant.

Built on 750 acres in a rural area about 15 miles north of the Quad Cities, the plant makes PFAS used in electronics and firefighting foam or shipped to other locations where carpets and textiles are treated, according to a company slide presentation.

3M kept Cordova out of enforcement proceedings for years by promising the Illinois agency in 2006 it would [clean up its property](#) through the state’s [site remediation program](#), a business-backed initiative that encourages polluters to voluntarily assess and address contaminated properties.

In return, the state agrees not to sue them.

State officials first learned in 2008 that [wells on 3M’s property](#) were contaminated with PFAS, according to the records obtained by the Tribune through Freedom of Information Act requests. The chemicals also had leached into wells of [homes outside the plant’s boundaries](#), state records show.

Documents provided to the state agency by 3M revealed that more than [370 acres of company-owned land](#) east of the chemical plant is contaminated with at least 74 million gallons of its [PFAS-laden sewage sludge](#).

Corn, soybeans and other field crops were grown in muck up to 6 feet deep until 2000. (The land is now fenced off and planted with native prairie species.)

About the only thing 3M did for more than a decade after its initial round of testing is assess the area's hydrology and [confirm each year](#) the wells were still contaminated, state records show.



3M's Cordova chemical plant on the Mississippi River upstream from the Quad Cities is seen Dec. 7, 2022. (E. Jason Wambsgans / Chicago Tribune)

“Getting chemical companies to voluntarily clean up their contamination is even less effective than asking my 7-year-old to voluntarily clean up his room,” said David Andrews, a senior scientist at the [Environmental Working Group](#), a nonprofit research organization that has studied PFAS and advocated for federal regulations since the early 2000s.

In 2013, an Illinois EPA official who oversaw 3M's involvement in the state program signed a [one-page form](#) advising his superiors no further investigation of Cordova was necessary. Other options on the form included referring the case to the agency's lawyers or seeking to shut down the chemical plant because under state law it posed an “imminent and substantial” threat to public health or the environment.

Around the same time, another division of the state agency discovered more reasons to be concerned. The Illinois EPA's Bureau of Water revised 3M's [Clean Water Act permit](#), issued by the state under authority delegated by the federal government, and for the first time required 3M to test quarterly for certain PFAS in the Cordova plant's wastewater discharged into the Mississippi.

Laboratory analyses of the first samples collected during March 2013 revealed levels of various PFAS were [orders of magnitude higher](#) than what 3M pumped into the Mississippi at its plant southeast of Minneapolis-St. Paul after Minnesota officials pressured the company to [upgrade its wastewater treatment](#) during the mid-2000s — something that didn't happen at Cordova until this year.

Quarterly reports from Cordova showed levels of some PFAS [increased over time](#).

Illinois EPA officials allowed [3M to dictate the process](#) again during 2014, [approving a company report](#) that concluded “there are no practical or feasible cleanup techniques that would result in meaningful reductions in releases to the environment” from the Cordova plant.

The U.S. EPA summed up the state's response in the federal agency's [November agreement](#) with 3M: “Despite state actions taken to address PFAS contamination from the facility,” the document reads, “(U.S.) EPA has determined those actions are not adequate, timely or are otherwise insufficient ... to address the potential imminent and substantial endangerment.”

That same phrase, “imminent and substantial,” showed up for the first time in the state's correspondence with 3M when the Illinois EPA moved to [kick the company out of the voluntary cleanup program](#) in April, nine years after the agency concluded no further investigation of Cordova was necessary.

Illinois Attorney General Kwame Raoul is now [suing 3M](#). Conspicuously absent from the lawsuit, filed in March, is language stating the Illinois EPA referred the case to Raoul's office, which almost always is the procedure when the state's top lawyer goes after polluters.

Neither Raoul nor John Kim, director of the Illinois EPA, responded to questions about the state's dealings with 3M before the lawsuit. In prepared statements, the agencies pledged to work together to protect Illinoisans from PFAS pollution.

“The alleged violations against 3M reveal longstanding and egregious violations of the Illinois Environmental Protection Act,” the Raoul statement said. Kim's spokeswoman provided a chronology that tracks the documents obtained by the Tribune. She said the agency is supporting the “current state and federal enforcement against 3M.”

Raoul's lawsuit relies in part on 3M documents made public during the Minnesota case and a report prepared by the U.S. EPA. An investigative team from the agency's offices in Chicago and Washington [collected water samples and surveyed conditions](#) at the Cordova plant in December 2019.

The level of PFOA in the plant's wastewater was 162,500 times higher than the latest federal health advisory, according to a [partially redacted copy](#) of the U.S. EPA report obtained by the Tribune. PFOS in the plant's outfall to the Mississippi was off the charts: a whopping 980,000 times higher than EPA guidelines.

Not mentioned in the report is that 3M had been reporting similar findings from Cordova since 2013 or that Minnesota's 2018 settlement with the company hinged in part on water testing the state's environmental agency began conducting during the early 2000s.

Plenty of warnings

3M is facing a [deluge of other lawsuits](#) across the United States and in Europe as more contaminated sites are discovered. The PFAS section of its most recent quarterly report to shareholders is 15 pages long, up from five paragraphs in the company's 2003 annual report.

[\[Persistent farmer whose cows died from a mysterious disease helped unravel the origin of toxic chemicals \]](#)

In Alabama, 3M has paid \$164 million since 2019 to settle lawsuits filed years earlier over PFAS pollution from its chemical plant in Decatur, a city on the Tennessee River in the northern part of the state.



Afternoon Briefing

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3M paid \$55 million in 2020 to [resolve another lawsuit](#) in Michigan. The money is being used to help provide clean water to Kent County neighborhoods contaminated with Scotchgard-laden waste dumped for decades into unlined landfills and gravel pits by a former tannery.

The most aggressive action so far has been in Belgium, where last year the government ordered 3M to [stop production of almost all PFAS](#) at its facility outside Antwerp. High levels of the chemicals have been found in soil near the plant and in the blood of neighbors.

Operations resumed in Belgium after [3M agreed in July](#) to pay 571 million euros (\$581 million) to clean up contaminated land, support nearby farmers and, similar to what it just did in Illinois, upgrade its wastewater treatment plant.

“How is it that in the year 2022, almost 2023, they are just getting around to Cordova?” said Rob Bilott, a [Cincinnati attorney](#) who [launched the scrutiny of forever chemicals](#) with lawsuits he filed against DuPont in Ohio and West Virginia during the 2000s.

Bilott is among a group of trial lawyers suing 3M, DuPont and other manufacturers in an effort to force the companies to pay for [medical monitoring](#) of every American exposed to forever chemicals. He is advising a team behind other lawsuits seeking 3M-financed water treatment in communities throughout the nation that have used the company's PFOS-based firefighting foam.

“State after state is going to go through this,” said Cwiertyny, the University of Iowa professor. “What’s happening now around Cordova just goes to show we’ve got a long way to go.”

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