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John: Welcome to EPA Region 2's podcasts, a series of environmental conversations about issues in New Jersey, New York, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. My name is John Senn and I work in EPA Region 2's Public Affairs Office in New York City. Today I'm joined by Mike Basile from our Buffalo field office. Mike is a Public Affairs Specialist in Buffalo and today he's going to talk with us a little about Love Canal. Mike, Welcome.

Mike: Good morning, John. How are you doing?

John: Great. Thanks for joining us today.

Mike: Pleasure.

John: This is kind of an anniversary, so to speak, of the Love Canal Superfund Site. It's a bit of an inauspicious anniversary in terms of Love Canal, but hopefully Mike, you are able to give us a little of the history and the background about the site and why we're doing this podcast here today.

Mike: Okay, John, yea. August is really the significant month because it was August 7th, 1978 when then President Jimmy Carter inked the first emergency declaration area that saw 239 home-owners, residents, in Love Canal which is a suburb of LaSalle, Niagara Falls, New York. Those folks were evacuated from their homes because of smells they were discovering in the basements. And there was a school that was built right atop of a former hazardous waste landfill and it was put there by the Hooker Chemical Corporation.

John: After a large amount of community activism and community involvement and awareness around the site, EPA got involved and decided that we needed some sort of clean-up to take place, which happened. And can you talk about the process of clean up, how that all went, EPA's monitoring efforts kind of after that happened, and the way that the Superfund Law as we know it today came to be in existence?

Mike: I'd be more than happy to. Basically what took place was the city of Niagara Falls was expanding out towards the suburbs and Love Canal is located in LaSalle. They were beginning to build many homes and the city Board of Education wanted to build a school and they saw this vacant piece of property that was owned by the former Hooker Chemical, now Occidental Petroleum Company, and they approached Hooker Chemical and said, "we'd like to buy this property." Hooker Chemical told the city of Niagara Falls, "we'd be more than happy to sell you the property but what are you going to do?" "We want to build a school. We want to build a grammar school." They said, "Well you know we can tell you that we used this 16-acre area to actually deposit hazardous waste byproducts and we covered it over and we suggest that you not build a school right on top of the canal." Again, the school system wanted it so what Hooker Chemical did is they deeded it for a dollar to the Niagara Falls Board of Education and the Board of Education put up the 99th Street School. They didn't build the school on top of the former canal, but built a playground. And in 1977 Western New

York was hit with a major winter blizzard. It kind of crippled the Western New York area for a series of days and we had a very early spring. With all the snowfall, a lot of the waste was deposited in 55 gallon drums in a lab packs in this 16-acre canal started to percolate and the water level, the aquifer, forced a lot of those chemicals towards the surface of the ground and into people's basements and of course there was a leakage on the playground at the 99th Street School and thus led to the first emergency declaration. With that the EPA got involved with the State of New York, the New York State DEC the New York State Department of Health. We ended up buying the first 239 homes but basically with the first ring of homes around this canal now which sits atop it a 99th Street School with that said it was very difficult for EPA to try to determine whether or not the contamination stopped on the first two blocks of where the school was located, so we ended up buying another 600 and some homes. When all was said and done the second emergency declaration was signed by President Carter on May 21, 1980, we ended up buying 950 homes and we relocated 7700 people at that time it was literally probably one-fifth of the total population of the city of Niagara Falls was directly affected by the Love Canal emergency declaration.

John: And then EPA went a step further, not only in helping clean up the site and put a cap on it so the remaining pollutants would be contained, but this site, the Love Canal site, also kind of spurred the creation of a national program to address similar sites across the country which many people know today as the Superfund Law.

Mike: Exactly. Our Congressman then was a gentleman by the name of John LaFalce. He served 25 years in Congress he was a freshman Congressman here in the Niagara Falls area. He actually was one of the co-authors of the Superfund legislation which is the comprehensive environmental response compensation and liability which set aside dollars from petroleum products, excise taxes were placed on these petroleum products and we literally created this "Super Fund." These dollars were made available to EPA so that when EPA would be looking at the unfortunate situation of another "Love Canal" we would have money available to do the things that we needed to do. When you look at the money that was spent to relocate 950 families, 7700 people, EPA didn't have the money at that time, found the money, but again it was this Love Canal site here in Niagara Falls that lead to the actually enactment of the Superfund legislation.

John: What's the current state of the site, Mike? The site was delisted. You've done some more work to make sure the site is no longer a threat to human health.

Mike: The current state of the site is if you were on the LaSalle expressway, which I take back and forth to my office in Buffalo everyday, I think it should be noted that I literally live three quarters of a mile east of Love Canal on the Black and Bergholtz Creek and I come atop of this expressway everyday and look directly to the east and see a 70-acre site that is all fenced in area it is a large landfill with green grass and trees growing on it. On the center of the site is the Leachate Collection System it's a storage facility that Hooker Chemical, now Occidental Petroleum, has their contractor really at this facility where we draw our ground water, rain water, through a series of pipes. It is treated in carbon filters on the site, then exits the site underground and goes downtown Niagara Falls, 7 miles

away, to Niagara Falls wastewater treatment facility where it undergoes some further carbon filters then goes directly into the Niagara River as clean water after it has been basically cleansed with these carbon filters. Today at Love Canal to the east of the canal there are some vacant property, to the west of the canal and north of the canal where sat probably around 240 homes that were boarded up for a 20 year period. Those homes were put back on the market, were sold after they received new roofs, new siding, new furnaces, and new windows. The New York State Department of Health issued a habitability decision in 1988 that said that the properties to the west of the canal and north of the canal are suitable for all rehabilitation. There are new families living in those homes today. The only thing that they're deemed safe and will stay forever is that their homes is one of the effected homes of the Love Canal emergency declaration area. But if there was a piece of property in the United States that has probably been tested, peer-reviewed, and deemed to be found clean it's the properties around Love Canal. It's true that the 20,000 tons of waste that came from Hooker Chemical facilities still sit underneath the cap, have sat there for some 30 years, we continue to conduct 5 year reviews at the site. The containment at the site as well as the collection of the rainwater is definitely protected for human health and the environment.

John: Excellent. So even though the site has been delisted, EPA still monitors for protection and just to make sure that the remedy is effective?

Mike: We not only revisit the Canal every 5 years, but we are privileged that we have the New York State Department of Environmental Conservation Region 9, which is located here in Buffalo. They monitor the site, Hooker Chemical contractors, on a monthly basis, they see to it that both the state and the federal regulations are met. And in respect to the remedy, as you indicated. And, once again, every 5 years we do revisit the site, we walk the site with our remedial project manager and we provide that information to the public that the remedy is still in place and we will continue to do that in perpetuity.

John: The Love Canal site was not just historic in that it was one of the first contaminated sites in the United States to get cleaned up and helped spur the Superfund law, but it was also, the whole situation was one of the turning points in the environmental activist movement. The local resident named Lois Gibbs, she was the president of the local residents association in Love Canal and she really started to bring all the problems that were happening, with her son in particular, and other residents to light and continued to bring this to the public's attention. Right Mike?

Mike: No doubt about that. As you indicated, the Love Canal was a site that really opened up an agency which was, we were only 7 years, 8 years old, EPA was born in December of 1970 and we're talking 1977-78. In 1978 when President Carter signed the first emergency declaration, Superfund wasn't created until early 1980 and of course, as you indicated, Love Canal truly was the site that probably spurred public interest and created environmental activism. Lois Gibbs was a home owner here at Love Canal and became and activist, definitely fought and snapped our suspenders at EPA many times. And we learned a great deal in the community relations arena. And we have used a lot of the lessons learned in dealing with the relocation, first of all, temporary relocation of

7700 people, and then the permanent relocation of 7700 people over a period of 5-6 years we learned a great deal. And a lot of this environmental activism and dealing with the public served to be a boiler plate for future activities around the country.

John: Yea. Love Canal definitely taught us many lessons about kind of how we in the United States view, and can react to, contaminated sites. How EPA as an agency can better work with the public and, in general, just the public's right and ability to be a member of the environmental dialogue. Mike, I just want to thank you for joining us today, I think you provided a lot of great insights and hopefully our listeners will hear some of those messages.

Mike: Thank you very much, John. It was a pleasure.

John: Well again, this is EPA Region 2's podcast addressing environmental issues in New Jersey, New York, Puerto Rico, and the U.S. Virgin Islands. For more information, visit epa.gov/region2.