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Documents: Hopewell plant AdvanSix flagged by feds for repeated chemical releases

https://richmond.com/news/local/business/hopewell-advansix-honeywell-allied-chemicals-epa-pollution/article_b986e9a6-c994-11ed-a02c-4f9e79a157db.html

For decades, a sprawling plastics facility on the James River has been the crown jewel of Hopewell's industrial hub.

Under different names, including Honeywell and Allied Chemical, the plant is part of the reason Hopewell earned its moniker as ["the chemical capital of the South."](#)

It is currently owned by [Parsippany, New Jersey-based AdvanSix](#) and is a descendant of the company responsible for the 1975 Kepone disaster, which shut down fishing in the James for years.

Regulatory filings reviewed by the Richmond Times-Dispatch indicate that the plant has been flagged 66 times in the past eight years for violations of the Clean Air Act and the Clean Water Act, releasing toxic chemicals into Hopewell's air, as well as into the James.

Hundreds of documents from the federal Environmental Protection Agency and the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality offer a window into how one of the area's largest factories breaks environmental law, according to the agencies.

Since 1990, the EPA and the DEQ have had the company on their radar. According to the EPA, AdvanSix violated the federal Clean Air Act, the country's primary air quality law, every month over the past two years.

[The Hopewell factory is one of the world's largest production sites for caprolactam](#), a chemical used to make a strain of nylon known as Nylon 6. The product shows up in seat belts, tires, clothing and rugs.

The plant sits at the southern end of the small city, within a mile of more than 900 residences, including public housing projects and a more affluent stretch of the neighborhood known as City Point. It commands about half a mile of real estate overlooking the James River.

'Patterns of noncompliance'

On March 29, 2022, the plant released a mist containing 7.23 tons of sulfuric acid, which the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention considers toxic even in small amounts. The leak came from equipment that inspectors had asked the company to repair years before, records show.

On May 6, regulators wrote to the plant's manager to discuss more than 390 tons of sulfur dioxide that the company had released over 10 years, records show. Each year, they said, its machinery had blown past its sulfur dioxide limitation, releasing more than 113 times the limit allowed by the state.

Sulfur dioxide is a harmful gas tracked by the EPA. The gas can damage the human respiratory system, particularly for children or people with asthma. The EPA says it's also harmful to trees, contributing to acid rain. AdvanSix said this release was still within the limit of its overall permit.

Between 2015 and 2016, AdvanSix released at least five excess tons of a gas called phenol. The company told regulators about the release on Jan. 26, 2018, nearly two years later, filings show. Phenol can cause gastrointestinal damage, cardiovascular disease after long exposures, and respiratory and skin damage at high levels of exposure, according to the CDC.

The factory also has been polluting directly into the river, the reports show. The EPA said the agency had documented "numerous and significant exceedances of stormwater benchmarks." The state also flagged the release of millions of gallons of cooling water into the James.

Chemical runoff, particularly nitrogen runoff, creates dead zones in the watershed around Hopewell. Dead zones indirectly kill life in the river. Scientists who study the Chesapeake Bay say dead zones are a known problem in the Hopewell area, where the river widens to the size of a lake.

The Times-Dispatch has published a full link to the violations at richmond.com.

AdvanSix says most violations were promptly corrected and that a majority of regulators' findings were actually self-reported by the company.

"At AdvanSix, we are committed to being good partners and neighbors in the communities in which we operate," said Janeen Lawlor, a spokesperson for the company. "This commitment includes a strong focus on ensuring responsible environmental stewardship and strict compliance with all regulatory requirements."

Lawlor said the company has spent millions of dollars upgrading the Hopewell plant. AdvanSix said it is committed to transparency and engaging with regulators and that all of the water compliance issues had been addressed.

State regulators offered a different perspective. DEQ spokesperson Aaron Proctor described the plant as having “patterns of noncompliance” dating back as far as 1990, when the facility was owned by Honeywell.

In 2013, the EPA and the DEQ brought Honeywell to the table to pay \$3 million in damages for releases of benzene, a toxic gas, as well as “failing to control nitrous oxide and particulate matter emissions.”

Two years later, Honeywell was hit with another consent order and made to pay \$300,000 in civil charges. This time, the company had spilled a cocktail of lethal chemicals into the James River, killing more than 2,000 fish.

And in each subsequent year since then — except 2020 — the plant's managers have received notices from regulators about gas leaks, spills, monitoring failures and reporting issues — first when it was owned by Honeywell and continuing into its current ownership by AdvanSix.

The DEQ is slowly building a case to make the plastics producer comply with environmental rules. The state has the authority to file an injunction or fine the company. To do either, all that state lawyers need to prove is the potential for harm, according to a DEQ manager familiar with AdvanSix's case.

Eric Schaeffer, who served as head of enforcement at the federal EPA under President Bill Clinton, reviewed the factory's regulatory records. [Schaeffer now heads the Environmental Integrity Project](#), a Washington, D.C.-based nonprofit group that investigates pollution at U.S. plants.

Schaeffer said he was surprised regulators had not done more to penalize AdvanSix. The company was fined \$50,000 in 2022 for its most recent offense. That same year, AdvanSix announced \$171 million in income, a slice of which the company used to perform stock buybacks.

“That’s not gonna do it. It’s just not going to do it,” Schaeffer said. “Especially when you have a repeat situation like this one. When the penalties are too small, I almost think of them as fees. It’s not enough to even qualify as a penalty.”

Schaeffer described the releases as “significant violations.”

“Benzene is a Class A carcinogen, and at pretty low levels of exposure. Phenol’s bad news. And sulfur dioxide reacts with ammonia to make fine particles, which are nasty and have a very high public health price,” Schaeffer said.

'Cleaner air to breathe, pure water to drink'

The AdvanSix plant is one of five mega-facilities in Hopewell, where manufacturing has been an economic staple for generations.

Pollutants released from the plant create potential health hazards in a community with one of the highest rates of poverty in Virginia. Hopewell's life expectancy is five years lower than the state average. Its cancer mortality rate is nearly double the state average, and its rates of hospitalization for asthma stand at three times the Virginia norm, according to state data.

The city's public health district said the Hopewell health trends are "concerning," but hesitated to draw any clear links.

"Life expectancy rates can't be attributable to any single determinant," said Julie Thacker, population health manager for the Crater Health District. Thacker said air quality was among a number of other factors, including access to health care and rates of poverty.

Those warning signs are not an excuse, Schaeffer said, although they are a common refrain he heard in his time at the EPA.

"If there are a lot of other (health) factors, the last thing you want is a bunch of chemicals in the air," he said.

Some of the houses nearest to AdvanSix include Hopewell's City Point, a higher-end suburban neighborhood near the Old City Point Waterfront Park, where Gen. Ulysses S. Grant's Civil War headquarters still stand.

Even closer to the plants are the Davisville and Bland houses — a predominantly Black federal housing project less than a mile from AdvanSix's smokestacks.

Mike Harris, a Hopewell City Council member, lives in the Davisville neighborhood. His house faces directly onto the plant.

"At night is when the light show begins," said Harris, referencing the spouts of smoke and flames that make a dramatic painting against the night sky. He can watch the performance from his window.

Harris is a new face in Hopewell city government, but grew up in the neighborhood in the 1950s and 1960s. He ran to represent the Davisville Ward — Ward 2 — by advocating for the basics. "Cleaner air to breathe, pure water to drink," reads one of his campaign posters.

Five years ago, Harris said, the city and federal Housing and Urban Development partners had planned to tear down the Davisville project, citing hazardous health conditions from nearby industry. The plan fell apart as resistance to being relocated and zoning ordinances created hurdles.

Harris, 73, said the City Council had never been told about any leaks from the plant. After his election in November, Harris was invited to lunch by an AdvanSix lobbyist, he said.

Harris said the company lobbyist never mentioned the violations, but did bring up an \$8 million special tax that the company pays to the city.

"They never said anything to us about these violations," Harris said. "And when I told my peers on the City Council, they said, 'Michael, what are we going to do about it?'"

AdvanSix declined to make local plant managers available for an interview.

The city's mayor, John Partin, is a former AdvanSix employee. Partin says Hopewell has pushed the company to do more by raising taxes on the plant to help fund projects for the city.

"I think it's concerning," said Partin, who explained that he had not been notified of the pollution violations, either. "That's why I'm reaching out to see what can be done to make sure we're holding the company accountable."

Legally, the company has a permit that allows it to dump over 1 million pounds of nitrogen into the river each year, more than any other company in Virginia. That is as much nitrogen as is produced by Henrico County, which has a population of over 300,000, according to state permit records.

AdvanSix secured the nitrogen allowance in the wake of its numerous consent orders and controversial history. In 1975, a company called Allied Chemical was dumping a toxic pesticide called Kepone in the Chesapeake Bay between 1966 and 1975. Allied then bought Honeywell in 1999, later spinning off AdvanSix in 2016.

Across the street from AdvanSix is a massive Dominion Energy power plant, as well as industrial plants that produce paper, chemicals and food additives.

AdvanSix is among the largest, commanding premium space along the James River waterfront, as well as a railway that allows the plant to bring in chemicals from across the country by train. The Hopewell plant is one of four owned by the company, which also operates a [Nylon 6 plant on Bermuda Hundred Road in Chesterfield County](#).

In 2021, company CEO Erin Kane issued a sustainability report, lauding the company's platinum rating for corporate social responsibility, which was issued by an independent group called EcoVadis.

The report "reflects our commitment to continuously improving our health, safety and environmental performance to best serve our customers, our key stakeholders and the communities where we live and work," Kane said.

That same year, however, AdvanSix was cited again by state regulators — this time for giving the state misleading readings of how much nitrogen one of its drains was releasing into the James, [according to a DEQ violation report](#).

A drain that should have been releasing 56 milligrams per liter of nitrogen was actually releasing 1,270 milligrams per liter, more than 20 times what discharge records said.

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Hopewell vows action on AdvanSix following Times-Dispatch report

https://richmond.com/news/local/government-politics/hopewell-advansix-pollution-statement/article_3bae6df4-d7c4-11ed-8c8b-13aaefbc7bb4.html

The city of Hopewell has announced that it will look [into alleged environmental violations by AdvanSix](#) that were reported in the Richmond Times-Dispatch.

“Our citizens deserve and demand a city that is safe and free from pollution. Towards that end, we will be reaching out to the Commonwealth to develop a plan of remediation that addresses Advansix air quality and water quality violations that they have received over the past three years,” said interim city manager Concetta Manker.

Manker said that the final goal was to “create a city that can be enjoyed by all.”

Over the weekend, the Times-Dispatch reported that AdvanSix, a New Jersey-based plastics and chemical producer with a plant in Hopewell, had incurred 66 regulatory violations since 2015.

The violations include releases of gasses identified as harmful by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which were flagged by state and federal regulators, [including the EPA](#).

The day after The Times-Dispatch article was published, Manker released a statement that Hopewell would be supporting and helping the state DEQ and the EPA to look into the violations.

In her statement, Manker said, “The City of Hopewell has recently become aware of the environmental violations of AdvanSix” and added, “we are working diligently to assist AdvanSix as they prepare to correct all patterns of noncompliance.”

Manker could not immediately be reached for further comment Monday.

The violations, listed by the Times-Dispatch, include the release of sulfur dioxide, ammonia and sulfuric acid into the ambient air in volumes that exceeded permissible levels, according to regulators.

They also include “numerous and significant” releases of stormwater runoff into the James River, the reports said.

The Times-Dispatch [published the full regulatory documents online, with minor redactions](#) to protect people’s privacy.

AdvanSix has previously said that it self-reported most of the violations to regulators. Janeen Lawlor, a spokesperson for the company, also said that it had invested millions in environmental upgrades to make the facility safer.

Lawlor said that many of the releases flagged by Virginia’s Department of Environmental Quality were still within the site’s overall permitted allowance.

Environmental advocates said the Times-Dispatch report only supported what they had said for years regarding pollution in Hopewell.

Glen Besa, former director of the Virginia Chapter of the Sierra Club, said the organization had pushed the state and the city of Hopewell for information, but got little for their efforts. “We made a push to clean up the chemical plants two decades ago and DEQ did nothing,” said Besa.

Besa said that the organization did not secure any “meaningful action by DEQ,” although they did win a health assessment and enhanced monitoring for Hopewell.

Besa was also critical of Hopewell’s city council for what he called their inaction.

“And the city council is aware of the long running problems with the plant,” Besa said. “They chose to ignore them.”

The company has not made an official statement since the reporting of the violations ran on Thursday.

On the same day that The Times-Dispatch published the regulatory documents, a group of 340 workers at the Hopewell plant went on strike for better wages. The job action does not affect the company’s other facilities.

That strike is ongoing, with company CEO Erin Kane [saying they have taken “substantial contingency measures”](#) to remain operational while the workers strike.

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State senator 'dismayed' by reports of chemical releases at Hopewell plant

https://richmond.com/news/state-and-regional/govt-and-politics/advansix-morrissey-benzene-phenol-toxic-hopewell-vdeq/article_6acd386e-e515-11ed-9773-6fb6b146498e.html

In a letter to state regulators, state Sen. Joe Morrissey, D-Richmond, said he was “dismayed” and “upset” by chemical releases at a Hopewell plant that were reported in a Richmond Times-Dispatch story earlier this month.

The [April 9 story documented violation reports collected by both the Environmental Protection Agency and the Virginia Department of Environmental Quality](#). The reports identify releases by a chemical plant run by a company called AdvanSix; the releases included large volumes of harmful chemicals that went beyond the company’s permit limitations.

“The tonnage of sulfuric acid, phenol, and benzene that was released into the air and water is indefensible,” Morrissey wrote.

Morrissey represents the city of Hopewell in the Virginia state Senate. Del. Carrie Coyner, R-Chesterfield, represents the city in the House of Delegates. Their letter was addressed to Mike Rolband, director of the DEQ.

“With regard to the recent defalcations (cases of handling of money) by AdvanSix, neither Delegate Coyner nor myself were aware of these violations. Indeed we were never notified in our capacities as the sitting Senator and Delegate as to the toxic chemicals being released into the air and water,” Morrissey said.

Morrissey also cited concern with the life expectancy in Hopewell, which is five years shorter than the state average. He said he did not blame AdvanSix entirely, but that the chemicals being released were “certainly contributing factors.”

In a footnote, Morrissey said he and his children “regularly ski and swim in the Appomattox and James River and I had no idea that these pollutants were being discharged directly into the river.”

The Times-Dispatch’s reporting identified numerous stormwater runoffs, [which contain nitrogen, a chemical that causes chemical dead zones that kill fish](#). The Times-Dispatch did not report that the company was releasing benzene, a known carcinogen, directly into the river.

The violation reports show documented releases of excess benzene occurred as recently as 2021, when a pressure relief valve malfunctioned.

From 2016 to 2019, the records show ambient air chemical releases that included benzene exceeded legal requirements each year. In 2018, the company released an average 38.55 pounds per hour, more than three times their limitation of 8.6 pounds per hour, according to DEQ documents.

AdvanSix has previously said The Times-Dispatch reporting is misleading, but has not identified any factual errors in its story. Janeen Lawlor, a company spokesperson, has said the violations were self-reported, that many have been corrected and that it “is not aware of any significant impact to the environment or risk to human health as a result of the operation of our plant.”

Morrissey offered assistance to Rolband and promised his support in backing any legislation in the 2024 General Assembly session.

The violation reports are publicly available online at Richmond.com.

The letter was also sent to The Times-Dispatch and is dated April 11, 2023.

Morrissey’s letter comes in the wake of a letter to the company from U.S. Congresswoman Jennifer McClellan, who took office earlier this year in a special election to replace former U.S. Rep. Donald McEachin, D-Richmond.

In her letter, McClellan asked AdvanSix to show how it will change its operations to avoid future clean air and clean water violations and how the company will work with the Environmental Protection Agency and the DEQ to comply with federal and state regulations.

Concetta Manker, Hopewell’s interim city manager, announced earlier this month that the city plans to work with the EPA and the DEQ to investigate the violations and to help AdvanSix become compliant.