

THE FACTS ABOUT ONONDAGA LAKE

Is Onondaga Lake clean?

Allied Chemical (a predecessor of Honeywell) and other companies dumped millions of pounds of hazardous wastes into the Lake over the course of a century. The chemicals in these wastes include mercury as well as 26 other toxic substances. The “cleanup” of Onondaga Lake left 80-90% of these wastes, millions of cubic yards, in place. **They are still there.** In order to prevent the chemicals from these sediments from rising into the water, Honeywell installed a cap intended to serve as a barrier. This cap is made up largely of several feet of sand, with some gravel and topsoil mixed in. It only covers about 1/7 of the lake bottom. Honeywell assured the public that the cap was designed to function properly for 1,000 years. However, it has already failed multiple times in various places around the lake, allowing the release of toxic chemicals into the water. **Does this sound clean?**

Are these chemicals present in the areas under consideration for a beach?

That’s hard to say, because very little testing of the sediment has been done in these areas. The testing that has been done, back in 1992, showed elevated levels of toxic substances near the potential beach sites. Until further testing is done, there is no way to know the extent of this contamination.

But the New York State Department of Health has declared the waters in the northern part of the lake swimmable! What does that mean?

This decision was based on four measures: clarity, levels of fecal coliform (sewage) bacteria, whether there is toxic algae, and whether there are chemicals present in the water in levels that would cause an immediate reaction, such as a rash. It does not consider what could happen to people who swim in the lake repeatedly over time. It is also based on water quality, not what’s in the sediments. Even if those sediments are covered with sand, hundreds of beach users walking through these areas will churn up the sand and expose the lake bottom underneath.

So what should be done?

The only way to ensure that these chemicals cannot harm the communities that rely on Onondaga Lake is to remove **all** of the contaminated sediments. In the meantime, public officials, both county and state, should stop portraying the lake as clean and safe. They need to be honest about the extent of the contamination and the risks it represents. They must stop encouraging recreational use of the lake. In addition, they need to create a thorough plan to monitor the cap and other structures intended to prevent the release of contaminants. They need to develop plans to respond when these structures inevitably fail.