

Looking Beyond the Smoke: The Environmental Response to the Mid-City Fire

The May 4 fire at the Mid-City Scrap facility on State Road was one of the largest industrial fires in recent memory in Westport. The thick smoke plume was visible for miles, prompting immediate concerns among residents about potential impacts to nearby wetlands, groundwater resources, and the broader watershed. Roughly 75 firefighters responded. Westport Fire was on scene for over 48 hours, and mutual aid from 15 communities, the Massachusetts DCR Forest Firefighting Division, and the Department of Fire Services assisted at the scene.

In the weeks that followed, the focus shifted from firefighting to environmental assessment. Because the fire involved shredded automobiles and associated industrial materials, the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (MassDEP) determined that there was the potential for the release of oil and hazardous materials. As a result, the agency required the facility owner to undertake an **Immediate Response Action** under the **Massachusetts Contingency Plan**.

Mid-City Scrap retained environmental consultants from SITEC Environmental, whose Licensed Site Professional (LSP) is conducting the assessment under MassDEP oversight. The investigation is intended to determine whether contaminants associated with the fire or firefighting activities affected surrounding environmental resources.

What Has Been Evaluated?

The initial investigation focused on several potential pathways through which contaminants could move away from the fire area. Investigators collected water samples from multiple detention and retention basins located on the property. These basins are designed to capture and contain stormwater runoff and, in this case, much of the water used to extinguish the fire.

Laboratory analyses included testing for volatile organic compounds (VOCs), petroleum hydrocarbons, metals, and other compounds commonly associated with vehicle fires and industrial runoff.

The consultants also reviewed private drinking water wells located within 1,000 feet of the site. According to the report, five private wells were identified and evaluated based on their location and local groundwater flow conditions. The report does not indicate that water samples were collected from these wells; rather, the assessment focused on determining whether groundwater conditions suggested a likely pathway for contamination.

What Have Investigators Found?

Testing detected several compounds associated with combustion products and industrial runoff within some of the on-site detention basins. However, investigators concluded that the firefighting water appears to have remained contained within the site's stormwater management system and did not overflow into surrounding areas during the emergency response.

The consultants also concluded that nearby private wells are unlikely to have been affected based on available groundwater flow information and the location of the wells relative to the site.

Importantly, the report notes that no firefighting foam containing PFAS was used during suppression activities, reducing concerns about the introduction of PFAS-related contaminants.

Is the Investigation Complete?

No. The environmental assessment remains ongoing. Additional groundwater sampling is planned, along with sediment sampling near basin overflow structures. Depending on the results, further monitoring or additional investigation may be required.

Under MassDEP regulations, the site's Licensed Site Professional must continue providing progress reports to the agency until the Immediate Response Action is completed and any necessary response measures have been addressed.

What's Next?

Industrial fires can affect environmental resources in ways that are not immediately visible. Smoke may dissipate within days, but understanding whether contaminants entered wetlands, groundwater, or surface waters requires careful investigation and monitoring.

As a watershed organization, the Watershed Alliance's interest is not in duplicating the work of regulators or environmental consultants, but in helping our community understand how environmental assessments are conducted and what they mean for the natural resources we all share.

We will continue to follow the investigation and provide updates as additional information becomes available through MassDEP, the Westport Board of Health, and other public sources. View the response documents related to the fire through the Massachusetts Environmental Affairs online database at:

https://urldefense.proofpoint.com/v2/url?u=https-3A_eeonline.eea.state.ma.us_DEP_WscNBApi_documents_get-2Dfile_afbbcdibj-3FfileSource-3DEDEP&d=DwMFaQ&c=euGZstcaTDllvimEN8b7jXrwqOf-v5A_Cdp gnVfiiMM&r=NNv7kxkO7M9xDvC4y6N0GPp4sZky1z614-D9qgb9DjKkSTpGIMv4l8XmvDaAn_Lu&m=kSfzsDWif3pDt7G_rHMaqRPb9xqGxAc68cvPF5at72AXc24y3tb2qob7Rb8oqkwv&s=2dJDa48lfdgta76UZGExJfvDmftNVmbtwqGi7bIKTVk&e=