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Guilty plea in Port Jefferson Station toxic waste case

BY: Robert Kessler

robert.kessler@newsday.com

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The head of a once major Long Island defense subcontractor pleaded guilty yesterday to violating federal pollution laws by turning his plant's site into a toxic waste dump. Gerald Cohen, the owner of the defunct Lawrence Aviation Industries in Port Jefferson Station, acknowledged in U.S. District Court in Central Islip that he illegally had stored 6 tons of toxic waste that had "the potential to be harmful" to people and the environment on the grounds of the plant.

Lawrence Aviation occupies a largely wooded site along Sheep Pasture Road above Port Jefferson Harbor. The site originally had been a turkey farm. When Cohen, a 76-year-old graduate of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, was arrested in September 2006, federal prosecutor Mark Lesko said "the site looked like a science-fiction horror movie," with barrels of hazardous chemicals spread helter-skelter around 35 acres of the 125-acre property.

Cohen, of 38 Bridle Path, St. James, had originally been charged with violating the federal Resource Conservation and Recovery Act by storing 12 tons of toxic waste on the site, but he admitted to the lesser amount in a plea bargain. Cohen faces up to 5 years in prison when Judge Denis Hurley sentences him, but the federal sentencing guidelines recommend between 12 and 18 months. He also faces fines of up to \$35 million. In addition, he is being sued civilly by the Justice Department for millions of dollars. That money would pay for the cost of the ongoing Environmental Protection Administration cleanup of the contaminated Superfund site and underground water table.

Homes near the site have been attached to a public water supply in place of wells. Cohen's attorney, Anthony La Pinta of Hauppauge, said the plea shows his client has taken responsibility for the contamination and is "committed to cleaning up the property." Lesko declined to comment.

The case is one of the few Justice Department criminal prosecutions for environmental violations. Cohen inherited the company when his father, Lawrence, died in 1982, and until the early 1990s, the company had been a major supplier of aviation parts, including to Grumman.

The company specialized in molding titanium parts for planes such as Grumman's F-14 Tomcat. At its high point, Lawrence Aviation employed 500 people and had annual revenues of \$30 million.

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