

Dig for arsenic widens in yards of south Minneapolis

Workers will scrape up and haul away the arsenic-tainted soil from the yards of 400 to 500 more homes in south Minneapolis, tripling the size of a toxic cleanup from a former pesticide plant.

By Tom Meersman and Joy Powell, Star Tribune

Workers will scrape up and haul away the arsenic-tainted soil from the yards of 400 to 500 more homes in south Minneapolis, tripling the size of a toxic cleanup from a former pesticide plant.

The former CMC Heartland site near the intersection of 28th Street and Hiawatha Avenue has been cleaned up and redeveloped, but pesticides that wafted from rail cars and storage areas while the plant was operating between 1938 and 1963 deposited arsenic in the densely populated neighborhood around it.

In recent years, 165 of the 200 most contaminated yards have been dug up and replaced with clean soil and plants. The scope of the investigation and cleanup prompted the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to add the site to the roster of the nation's most polluted places.

The EPA added the site to the Superfund's National Priority List last month.

Under a new state law, public health workers will seek 100 people from the neighborhood to volunteer to have their bodies tested for arsenic. Health officials have said that the risk from the contaminated yards is low, particularly since much of the contaminated soil is under grass or other vegetation.

"The main exposure that we're concerned about is accidental ingestion of soil," said Tannie Eshenaur, community health educator for the state Department of Health. "We're concerned about children who have a lot of hand-to-mouth contact, and the soil and dust that might be on their hands."

Tim Prendiville, EPA remedial project manager, said the agency has tested about 3,500 residential properties within a $\frac{3}{4}$ -mile radius of the former plant and has no plans to extend testing area further.

About 200 yards contained high levels of the arsenic, defined as above 95 parts per million, he said. Most of them have been cleaned up, and the last 35 will be completed next spring, Prendiville said. The cleanup has cost \$5 million so far.

The additional 400 to 500 yards contain arsenic at concentrations from 25 to 95 parts per million, Prendiville said.

The agency is following its standard procedure in large projects of tackling the "worst first," he said, and then beginning a second phase of cleanup for areas that are less contaminated but could still be a problem if residents are exposed to those lower arsenic levels for decades.

He said property owners whose yards were tested previously have been notified by mail of how much arsenic is in their soil.

A fact sheet was sent to them and to about 5,500 other homeowners and renters just outside the testing area that provides information about cleanup plans, which include public meetings in mid-November, a public comment period and a final decision about the lower end of the cleanup, expected to be 16 to 25 parts per million.

Prendiville said yard cleanups probably wouldn't begin until 2009, and that those affected would be contacted well in advance to sign access agreements.

Neighbors hear of plans

On Tuesday night, more than 60 people attended an informational meeting at the Lake Street YWCA.

Among them was Rep. Karen Clark, DFL-Minneapolis, whose own yard was cleaned up two years ago.

The discussion of the risks and how people can protect themselves has been too long coming, she said. "Arsenic is one of the most toxic heavy metals there is," she said.

It's especially frightening for parents of toddlers, pregnant women and elderly people with lowered immunities that make them especially vulnerable to even low levels of arsenic, she said.

The free cleanup includes removing grass, plants and small trees so that about a foot of soil can be excavated and trucked to a licensed landfill. Contractors then provide clean soil, and landscape the property with new grass and plants.

Eshenaur said that homeowners and renters can reduce their risk of exposure to arsenic by washing their hands and their children's hands, by vacuuming and dusting frequently, and by removing shoes before entering homes.

She said that gardeners face little risk, especially if they wash their vegetables and peel root crops such as carrots and potatoes.

Eshenaur said that the Legislature authorized research this year for a pilot biomonitoring project to measure certain contaminants in specific environments and in humans who live there.

She said that the scientific committee guiding that research has decided to seek 100 volunteers from the south Minneapolis area near the former pesticide plant for the arsenic portion of the study.

Worries linger

Barbara Hoffman, a 49-year-old mother of three, said Tuesday that she worries about her yard in the Corcoran neighborhood. Her soil was tested and arsenic levels weren't high enough to require remedial work. But neighbors on both sides of her home had levels high enough that their yards are being cleaned up.

"They talked about keeping windows shut when the wind is blowing, cleaning off toys left outside, and not mowing bare spots in the yard so that the dust would whirl," Hoffman said of advice that environmental experts gave her shortly after the testing.

She said such advice made her wonder if there might still be danger to her family, even though remedial cleanup has not been approved for their yard.

She said she worries that the random testing may have simply been in locations where arsenic levels weren't as high as they are on the rest of her property, and hopes authorities will consider resampling.

Like many others in the neighborhood, she said she's also worried about property values plummeting.

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