



Toxic Trainyards

Spill fumes in crawlspaces worry residents

The Oregon Public Health Division announced last week that toxic vapors collecting in the crawlspaces of some residential homes near an underground railroad pollution plume represent a health hazard.

“Action is needed to prevent future exposure to residents in these homes,” said state epidemiologist Jae Douglas. Douglas prepared a report on the toxic hazard for the state Superfund Health Investigation and Education Program (SHINE).

Douglas recommended that homes near the tracks in northwest Eugene with higher levels of volatile organic compound (VOC) vapors install ventilation systems or vapor barriers. Exposure to small amounts of one VOC called trichloroethylene (TCE) can lead to short-term effects such as dizziness, headaches, lung irritation and poor concentration. Long-term exposure to TCE and tetrachloroethylene (PCE) may lead to liver and kidney damage.

Despite the possible health hazard, Greg Aitken, the Department of Environmental Quality’s (DEQ) cleanup manager for the railroad site told concerned residents at a recent meeting that it could not afford to test every home at risk. “The answer is no. I’ll be honest with you,” he said.

Aitken said the railyard pollution is largely cleaned up and DEQ is now focused on environmental restoration in neighborhoods close to the area. “It’s a complicated site,” Aitken said. “We’ve been studying it for 14 years.” When asked to estimate the project’s end, he said “final cleanup is years away.”

Railroad neighbors at the meeting expressed concerns about the extended cleanup schedule and the non-availability of free testing to affected homes. A citizen questioned whether a conflict of interest could exist in having Union Pacific fund the railyard contamination study since state-funded testing may have yielded results sooner.

Some residents also pointed out that homes in the contaminated areas built over concrete foundations as opposed to crawlspaces were not tested at all.

State Rep. Chris Edwards of Eugene, who attended the meeting, emphasized that information needs to be provided to landowners as well as tenants about groundwater contamination and hazardous fumes in crawlspaces.

Later tenants in residential areas with high VOC concentrations may not know the risks of drinking well water or the potentially hazardous fumes in the crawlspaces, and “that’s kind of creepy,” Edwards said. He would like

to see state officials devise a programmed way to maintain contact with tenants.

One attendee suggested mailing letters to renters and tenants as a possible solution.

Since the mid 1990s, the Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) along with the Oregon Toxics Alliance (OTA) have monitored the environmental impact and health risks posed to railyard workers and nearby residents as a result of Union Pacific Railroad operations near the River Road and Trainsong neighborhoods.

For decades, “drips, spills and operating practices associated with use and disposal of creosote, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs), heavy metals, and volatile organic chlorinated solvents (VOCs), contaminated the soil and groundwater at the railyard” stated the SHINE report. “This contamination migrated into the groundwater off-site in the neighborhoods adjacent to the railyard.” This led to concern about the potential health effects of exposure to contaminants.

SHINE’s Douglas said exposure to contaminated well water in the River Road neighborhood does not pose a health risk as long as residents do not drink the water. Residents can continue to use well water to irrigate gardens and wash cars and outdoor surfaces. “Use your municipal water to drink,” she said.

Douglas said she does not “think there’s a reason to be fearful.” Based on exposure to the highest levels of TCE and PCE detected, SHINE’s report indicated that cancer rates would theoretically increase to about seven additional cases per 1,000 persons exposed over a lifetime. Median concentrations indicated an overall cancer increase of about three in 10,000. Exposure to well water, as long as it is not ingested, poses no cancer risk.

But resident Patty Burkart pointed out that health risks are also cumulative. “None of us live in laboratory conditions,” she said. “Pollutants can potentiate each other.” She expressed concern that current data does not consider the cumulative effect of being exposed to multiple contaminants. She said, “things acting together can create more problems than when isolated.”

Some neighborhoods near the railyard are also exposed to high levels of airborne pollutants from the J.H. Baxter wood treatment plant.

To read the health report and comment on the investigation, visit the www.oregon.gov/DHS/ph/shine/uprsite.shtm website. SHINE invites public comment through June 27. **EW**

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