

Punxsutawney Groundwater Contamination Site

—Frequently Asked Questions—

Question—What are the geographical parameters of the Punxsutawney Contamination site?

Answer— The Pa. Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) is currently in the process of investigating the nature and extent of contamination in the soils and groundwater beneath the surface in an area of Punxsutawney in Jefferson County. The neighborhood being evaluated is bounded by Sawmill Run Creek to the west and Mahoning Creek to the south. The northern and eastern boundaries are unknown. The area is largely residential, although some businesses operate in the neighborhood.

Question—What contaminants are present at the site?

Answer— Investigators have learned that soil and groundwater have been contaminated with trichloroethene (TCE), cyanide and various metals, including mercury, nickel, lead, chromium, copper and aluminum. Two electroplating companies previously operated within the area and the specific combination of hazardous substances implicates electroplating waste as a probable source of contamination.

The primary contaminants found in the investigation area are called volatile organic compounds (VOCs). The compounds have a volatile nature, and may move from water and soil into the air if a route to air is readily available to them. Often, when these compounds volatilize from the soil and/or groundwater and enter the outside open air, they rapidly dissipate and are undetectable by routine sampling. However, the detectable concentrations of these volatile compounds in air may be higher if they happen to volatilize into enclosed areas in a building with little or not fresh air circulation, such as basements, crawlspaces, or even the first floor of a building.

Question—What does this situation mean to the people who live or work in the area?

Answer— DEP contacted property owners in the site area in August 2006 to request their cooperation in the investigation. The department asked to gain access to yards and some basements for sampling purposes and to find out if vapor from the pollutants could be coming into contact with residents and the potential for human health risk.

In fall 2007, contractors hired by DEP removed 1,616 tons of waste from alleyways outside the Berlin Metals Building, located at 400 Walnut St., to

eliminate the source of contaminants in the area that may have posed a threat to people who live and work in the neighborhood.

In 2008, DEP discovered during an inspection of the Berlin Metals Building that hexavalent chromium was seeping through cracks in the concrete floor of the building. Hexavalent chromium is used in chromium plating operations and is a known human carcinogen. Soon after, DEP ordered the property owners of the Berlin Metals Building to secure the building and prevent anyone from entering until remediation work can be completed and the property made safe.

In 2009, DEP is conducting additional investigation to make sure that the department has a full, comprehensive understanding of the contamination that remains with the goal of protecting public health. The department is adding more groundwater monitoring wells and conducting soil gas sampling to fill in data gaps. In the meantime, a DEP contractor is developing a plan to deal with the contamination beneath the Berlin Metals Building.

Two of the homes that DEP tested for potential contamination impact warranted the installation of mitigation systems to prevent vapors from entering basements or potential living areas. One of the homes was outfitted in January 2009 with a system similar to a radon mitigation system and the second home is being addressed this spring.

Question—Are there health risks associated with this contamination?

Answer— Information regarding health risks associated with contamination identified at the site can be found at the U. S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) website: www.epa.gov/superfund/resources/chemicals.htm.

Question—Who is paying for this investigation and remediation?

Answer— The DEP investigation and remediation are funded through the Hazardous Sites Cleanup Fund, which enables DEP to address contaminated sites while pursuing responsible parties to reimburse any or all of the costs. This program is the state's most important tool to eliminate threats to public health and safety when toxic chemicals or hazardous substances are found in the environment.

Question—What information sources are there for me to find out more about this site?

Answer—DEP has established a file repository at the Punxsutawney Borough Office, 301 East Mahoning Street, Punxsutawney. Residents who wish to

review public documents related to the investigation should contact the Punxsutawney Borough Manager at 814-938-4480 to schedule a file review. Those wishing to speak to a DEP representative regarding the investigation can contact Environmental Cleanup Program Project Manager John Morettini at 814-332-6666 or via email at jmorettini@state.pa.us. DEP also will hold future public meetings as needed.