

Koppers cleanup still at least a year away

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Nearly two years after the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency released the final blueprint for the cleanup of the Koppers Superfund site in Gainesville, there is no final agreement in place to implement the plan.

After lengthy negotiations, Beazer East Inc., the company legally responsible for the remediation of the contaminated former wood treatment plant and affected off-site properties, has signed off on the agreement or consent decree.

But the EPA still has to approve the document. Scott Miller, the EPA project manager for the site, said officials with the federal agency were processing the agreement and there was no definitive timeline for when it would receive final approval.

Miller said Friday that the complexity and expense of the cleanup plan caused negotiations to "take longer than we expected."

He said the estimated \$90 million cleanup will implement the EPA plan as written. That includes the cleanup of off-site soils to the state of Florida's more stringent standard for dioxin, a carcinogen released from several sources, including the wood-treatment processes used at Koppers.

Still, the local community and city and county government will not get everything they sought. Contaminated soils from the former wood treatment property and adjacent properties will be contained and stored on the Koppers site — not hauled off. There also will be no permanent relocation offered to residents.

Even after the consent decree is approved, it is expected to be at least a year before work begins on the removal of a foot of soil from contaminated yards and properties near the former wood treatment plant, which is off Northwest 23rd Avenue a short distance east of Northwest Sixth Street.

"If everything falls in place as to where we're at now, that's what we're looking at," Mitchell Brouman, who manages the remediation of contaminated sites for Beazer East, said of the timeline.

Brouman said the company needs access agreements to go on private property for remediation work and has to go through permitting, a process that may involve obtaining permission from city government for tree removal on the properties to be excavated.

Brouman said there remains no firm number for how many properties will be included in the cleanup. Most of the off-site work will focus on residential properties in the area of the Stephen Foster Neighborhood west of Koppers to Northwest Sixth Street and north to Northwest 32nd Avenue.

When remediation eventually does begin, Brouman said the entire project, which includes moving contaminated soils to a containment area on the site, could take four to six months.



It has been a long time coming. The full Cabot/Koppers property was placed on the federal Superfund priority list some 30 years ago and the EPA released the final decision detailing cleanup requirements in early 2011.

"Many of us in the community are exhausted by this point," said Robert Pearce, the president of the Stephen Foster Neighborhood Association.

Pearce pointed to some progress in recent years — such as the wood treatment plant ceasing operations and removing all structures.

Remediation activities to date on the area of the property for which Beazer East is responsible have included the development of large stormwater ponds to treat runoff before it flows into Springstead Creek and eventually into Hogtown Creek.

The last several months also brought additional rounds of environmental tests. Lab tests were done to measure the levels of dioxin in indoor dust samples from homes in the area and, as a point of comparison, homes some two miles away.

Late last week, the EPA mailed letters to the owners of homes from which samples were collected stating that the agency concluded the lab tests showed levels of dioxin were within the acceptable range and no indoor cleanup would be required at homes near Koppers.

The Florida Department of Health and the U.S. Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry are now studying the dust test results "to determine what, if any, health threat exists from life-long exposure," according to Anthony Dennis with the Alachua County Health Department.

A Florida Department of Health review of the latest round of soil samples concluded that the levels present of arsenic, dioxin and polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbon posed "very low" health and cancer risks.

The attorneys in a nearly \$10 million lawsuit against Koppers are skeptical of those conclusions.

Stuart Calwell, a West Virginia-based attorney representing the plaintiffs, said the DOH review of the soil samples and a prior health survey that relied on U.S. Census data to conclude there is no elevated cancer risk in the area were both well-intended. But Calwell said he felt that, in each case, the available data were too limited to provide definitive results.

There are six named plaintiffs in the federal lawsuit, which seeks damages for diminished property values, loss of use and enjoyment of property, stigma and increased risk of adverse health effects. The attorneys are seeking class-action status.