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A toxic neighbor



Sun file photo
Aerial of the Koppers Superfund site on NW 23rd Avenue in Gainesville.

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By NATHAN CRABBE

Sun staff writer

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For three decades, Sharon Sheets has lived three doors down from the Koppers Superfund site.

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Over that time, she stopped growing vegetables in her yard and started shutting her windows.

They weren't easy steps for a vegetarian who lacks air conditioning, but she worried about toxic dust blowing from the site onto her property.

Now Sheets' fears seem to have been validated by a new round of testing in her northwest Gainesville neighborhood. The tests show arsenic and dioxins in the soil at levels exceeding state cleanup standards.

Sheets said the tests add to her frustrations over waiting for the site to be cleaned.

"It's still contaminated above ground and below ground," she said. "I just want more attention paid to it."

Local environmental officials say the results suggest pollutants are blowing off the property. They want Beazer East, the company responsible for the cleanup, to further investigate the scope of off-site contamination.

"We'd like to see some off-site sampling in the neighborhood to confirm what's out there," said John Mousa, pollution prevention manager for the Alachua County Environmental Protection Department.

Beazer is "still digesting" the results and has yet to make a decision about off-site testing, said Mitchell Brouman, an environmental manager for the Pittsburgh-based company.

At a recent neighborhood meeting, Brouman said the contamination doesn't pose a significant health threat.

"My advice would be grow your garden, but wash your vegetables off," he said.

The 90-acre site is contaminated with a mix of wood-treating chemicals called creosote. Creosote contains chemicals that have been shown to cause cancer, neurological disorders and reproductive problems.

In 1983, the property was placed in the federal Superfund cleanup program. Beazer East briefly owned the site and maintains legal responsibility for the cleanup.

The property is bordered by homes on the west near NW 6th Street and businesses on the east near N. Main Street. It is two miles south of the Murphree Well Field, which provides the city's drinking water.

In recent years, the threat to the well field has been the focus of cleanup efforts. Beazer has spent \$7.5 million on the installation of 58 wells in the past two years to determine the scope of groundwater contamination.

The effort moved off site in recent months. Ten wells were installed in roads and on private properties near the site, intended to gauge whether contamination has spread outward.

The installation of the wells led to the discovery of soil contamination. A well drilled in September at the end of NW 26th Avenue accidentally damaged a sewer line, causing sewage to flow back into a nearby home.

"It was a nightmare for us," said Ron Rector, who lives in the home.

Gainesville Regional Utilities, concerned about worker safety, delayed replacing the line until testing was done of the surrounding soil. The testing found arsenic and dioxins at levels exceeding state cleanup standards.

Samples showed arsenic at levels up to 49 parts per million - or more than 20 times the residential cleanup standard. Dioxins were found at levels up to 50 parts per trillion - or more than seven times the residential cleanup standard .

Arsenic has been linked to cancer of the bladder, lungs, skin, kidney, nasal passages, liver and prostate. Exposure to dioxins is associated with a wide range of health problems including impairment of the immune system and developmental disorders.

GRU is planning on replacing the line in the coming weeks and will conduct air monitoring to ensure the work doesn't pose a health problem, said John Gifford, the utility's wastewater collection system director.

The tests shouldn't alarm residents, said Scott Miller, remedial project manager for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Testing has yet to be done to establish the levels of the contaminants that could occur naturally or be caused by combustion or other sources, he said.

"Dioxins are everywhere," he said.

Mousa said exposure to dust doesn't pose a short-term health risk. But at this time, he said, environmental officials are simply asking for more testing before a cleanup plan is chosen.

"What we don't want is to have them miss what's happening off site," he said.

An EPA timeline has a cleanup plan being selected in 2009. Brouman said cleanup work on the surface could take another two to three years, but groundwater monitoring will continue indefinitely.

The site will likely never be clean to the level that would allow residential development there, he said.

"There will always be activity and use limitations associated with that property," he said.

For Sheets, such statements are a bitter pill to swallow. Since the site was placed in the Superfund program, she's followed the slow progress of the cleanup as she watched neighbors move due to concerns over the site.

Sheets, 56, suffers from respiratory problems that she worries could be caused or exacerbated by the site. But she said she has no plans to move.

"This is my home," she said.

She said she wants local elected officials to take a more active role in the cleanup. While she said the 2009 deadline for a cleanup plan is a good sign, she's already seen years of wasted efforts and delays.

"I think I will be dead and gone before anything gets done," she said.

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