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Bob Palmer: UF's help needed at Koppers

Help the community understand the environmental impacts.

*By Bob Palmer
Special to The Sun*

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The University of Florida is missing a great opportunity for partnership with the citizens of Gainesville and Alachua County. It needs to join the 25-year struggle to clean up the Koppers Superfund site.

Inexplicably, through decades of city and county hearings, community meetings and scientific studies, UF has been missing in action from all efforts to remediate, or even to better characterize, the toxic mess situated less than two miles northeast of its flagship campus.

A university which prides itself on its environmental consciousness has ignored the most significant environmental threat to local residents, not to mention its own faculty, staff and students.

The ongoing Koppers drama has been well documented the pages of The Sun. Toxic chemicals including arsenic, dioxins, benzo(a)pyrene and pentachlorophenol - the products of 90 years of wood treatment - have contaminated groundwater under and around the site, stormwater flowing into neighboring creeks, and soils on the site and in adjacent residential areas.

Several of these carcinogenic chemicals have already been detected more than 200 feet below the site in the Floridan Aquifer, a sobering fact given that drinking water for our community comes from Floridan wells located just 2 miles north of the site.

And residents in adjacent neighborhoods, exposed to toxic chemicals for decades, have reported increased incidences of cancer and other health issues. Many members of the UF community probably live in these nearby communities.

Earlier this year, the Environmental Protection Agency issued a "Draft Feasibility Study" outlining plans for the responsible industrial parties to clean up the site. The clean-up plan has been judged to be woefully inadequate to the task at hand by the Gainesville City Commission, by the Alachua County Commission, by Gainesville Regional Utilities (which provides Alachua County and UF with its drinking water) and by nearby residents.

Over the next year or so, all of these parties will attempt to persuade EPA to toughen the clean-up plan.

Some of the inadequacies of the Feasibility Study can be traced to the Superfund process itself. The clean-up plan was drafted by EPA in conjunction with the company liable for the

clean-up costs (Beezer's) and was based on soil, air and water quality data supplied by Beezer's. This is a process well suited to produce the least-cost solution rather than the most effective solution.

But there is another important reason why the clean-up plan is flawed - a serious lack of relevant and reliable health and environmental data.

Twenty-five years after Koppers was designated as a Superfund site, we still lack the most basic information about the health and epidemiology of local residents, about air quality, about pollutants in stormwater and about the ecology of local creeks.

Information on pollutants in soils needs to be independently verified and then expanded, the appropriateness of environmental models needs to be assessed and the efficacy of clean-up techniques needs to be independently evaluated.

These data needs point to the role that UF should have assumed long ago - helping the local community understand the health and environmental impacts of Koppers and evaluate various options for remediation. UF has an army of professors, researchers and graduate students well suited to the task.

For example, the College of Public Health has expertise in epidemiology and air pollution; the College of Engineering in water chemistry and environmental engineering; the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences in biology, ecology, geology and statistics; and IFAS in soil science.

UF administrators would no doubt plead poverty if asked to fund environmental monitoring of the Koppers site. But neighborhood associations near the site are funding their efforts with bake sales and car washes, and the City's and County's environmental budgets are thoroughly strapped. UF, on the other hand, has access to thousands of researchers and a research budget exceeding \$500 million.

Besides, many of the ways in which UF could help would not necessarily cost a lot of money. An epidemiological study by expert volunteers from the College of Public Health could be done inexpensively, as could critical review of the models used by EPA and Koppers to calculate health and environmental risks.

Given that many graduate-level biology classes utilize students to conduct comprehensive field studies, some ecological studies could essentially be done for free. Why not ask one of these classes to conduct a semester-long ecological study of Springstead Creek, which receives all the stormwater run-off from Koppers? Such a study would be a vast improvement over anything contained in EPA's Feasibility Study.

Given that EPA's final decision may be less than a year off, UF President Bernie Machen should immediately establish a task force, comprised of members from the four colleges mentioned above, with a mandate to come up with quick and effective ways to help the local community respond to its need for credible scientific advice. The task force should meet with city and county staff, as well as concerned local residents, and develop an action plan.

There are several faculty members in these departments who are already interested in helping out; a push from the top levels of the university is all that would be necessary to focus, expand and coordinate this interest. Perhaps UF has ignored Koppers all this time because it wasn't keen to advertise to its students and their parents that a Superfund site is right around the corner from its beautiful campus. Whatever the reason, now is the time for UF to make up for 25 years of neglect.

Bob Palmer is vice-chairman of Alachua County's Environmental Protection Advisory Committee.

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