Toxic waste spreads to site's borders

TRACY WILCOX/The Gainesville Sun
Employees of GeoTrans Inc. and Miller Drilling Inc. develop monitoring wells outside the Koppers Superfund site on the Recycling Services of America property in Gainesville on Wednesday.

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By NATHAN CRABBE
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Elevated levels of toxic chemicals have been found near the borders of the Koppers Superfund site in northwest Gainesville, leading to a push for testing of nearby properties before a final cleanup plan is chosen.

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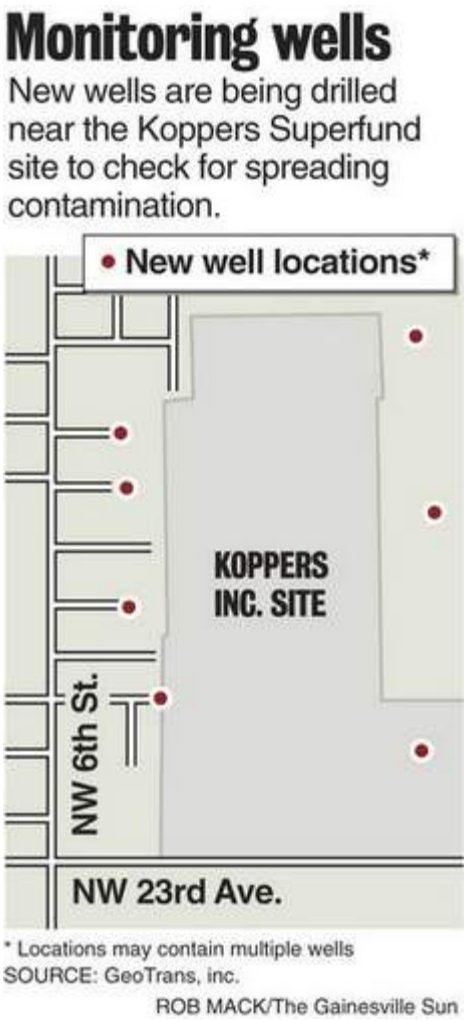

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Eleven monitoring wells are being installed in roads and on private properties near the site, which is located north of NW 23rd Avenue and west of Main Street. The wells are intended to show whether contamination has spread in groundwater under those properties.

Alachua County officials are also asking for soil to be tested from some of the dozens of homes west of the site. A recent round of on-site soil tests found toxic chemicals near the western boundary at levels nearly 130 times state cleanup standards for residential properties.

"We don't think this is a reason for people to be alarmed short-term," said Chris Bird, director of the Alachua County Environmental Protection Department. "A lot of this is important in the context of the long-term cleanup of the site."

With the site having been a part of the federal Superfund program for nearly 25 years, the work is expected to form the basis of a final cleanup plan. A timeline from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has the plan being selected in 2009.

The deadline should be met, but it will take years longer for the cleanup to be done, said Mitchell Brourman, an environmental manager for Beazer East. The Pittsburgh-based company briefly owned the site and maintains legal responsibility for the cleanup.

"You're not going to go there and erase 50 years of industrial activity in a year or two," Brourman 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.

The property has housed a wood-treating operation since 1916, although use of creosote ended in the early 1990s. Beazer bought the site after the contamination occurred, then sold the property but maintained liability 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 Wellfield, which provides the city's drinking water.

GRU would have liked to see immediate steps taken to prevent threats to the drinking water supply, said Rick Hutton, senior water and wastewater engineer for the utility. But he said the testing is needed to ensure the cleanup adequately deals with contamination.

"They really need to do the investigation before they come up with the final remedy," he said.

While previous testing has focused on groundwater, new tests have looked at soil on the site. A recent round of tests, released this week, found levels of dioxins 2.5 to 129 times the state of Florida's cleanup standard for residential properties.

Elevated levels of dioxins were found in the top three inches of soil on the eastern and western borders of the site. Exposure to dioxins is associated with a wide range of health problems including impairment of the immune system and developmental disorders.

Bird said the samples indicate contamination has blown from creosote-heavy patches within the site to the boundaries. The results raise questions about whether the contamination has also blown onto nearby homes, he said, showing the need for off-site testing.

"There are a lot of things we don't know, and we won't know until there's samples taken," Bird said.

Brourman said the company is "still digesting" the results of the latest testing. The company will use the testing as the basis of the final cleanup plan, he said. "We're going to get our hands around the global size of it," he said.

He said the company has spent $7.5 million on the installation of 58 wells in the past two years, including the 11 new off-site wells. The wells that are now being installed will gauge whether contamination has spread outward in a middle section of clay and groundwater called the Hawthorn Group.

The work started in September and is expected to be finished in the next two months. The installation of a well at the end of NW 26th Avenue accidentally damaged a sewer line, causing delays.

This week, a well was installed at Recycling Services of America at the end of NE 28th Place. Owner Rod Ingram said he's been there five years and was aware of problems with the Koppers site.

"This is just something we inherited when we bought the property," he said.

He said off-site groundwater testing so far has indicated contamination has not spread there, so he's not worried about what the new wells might find.

At least two homes in the area use private drinking water wells, said Paul Myers, Alachua County environmental health director. Twenty-five years of tests on those wells have not revealed any contamination from the Superfund site, he said.

But on-site wells have been a different story. One round of groundwater tests, in results released last year, showed benzene and napthalene more than 225 feet under the site in the Floridan Aquifer.

Benzene is a known carcinogen and napthalene can cause liver and neurological damage.

Test results also appeared to show contamination at higher levels in samples that were taken from greater depths. A second group of deeper monitoring wells was installed to determine the depth of contamination, but officials say they're waiting for a new round of testing before determining the results.

In the coming months, Beazer is also testing several possible cleanup methods. One method extracts contamination from soil, while the other prevents it from spreading.

At other polluted sites throughout the country, Beazer has spent millions removing contaminated soil, restoring waterways and other cleanup measures.

Brourman said the methods being tested on the Gainesville site could be part of the cleanup plan there. The groundwater and soil sampling will form the basis of whatever plan is chosen, he said.

"We're not dealing with hypothetical scenarios anymore," he said.

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Comments