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Environmental News

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EPA Announces Actions to Address New Findings on Woonasquatucket River

BOSTON - After learning this morning of preliminary data showing significantly elevated levels of of dioxin contamination at several properties along the Woonasquatucket River in North Providence, RI, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency today launched an action plan to notify and protect residents from potential exposure to the harmful substance.

John P. DeVillars, the EPA's New England Administrator, said that high levels of contamination were found at three locations out of two-dozen locations sampled in late October. The sampling locations were at Centerdale Manor, an elderly residential complex in North Providence; on a riverbank adjacent to the Lee Romano baseball field in North Providence and on a riverbank just upstream from Allendale Dam.

The finalized sampling results will not be made available until the EPA laboratory in Kansas finishes its final analysis of the samples. Final results are expected by the end of the month.

"The recent sampling results, although not yet confirmed by our environmental testing lab in Kansas, warrant immediate action," DeVillars said. "EPA will always err on the side of caution when making decisions that affect the public. And, given where some of these samples were collected, it is incumbent on us to move aggressively and quickly to protect public health. We'll be on the ground in North Providence tomorrow morning to give residents the information we have as we lay out the next steps to safeguard the community from potential exposure to dioxin."

Given the preliminary data, EPA is undertaking the following actions, beginning today:

* Notified Centerdale Manor, North Providence officials and state officials today of the preliminary data results.

* Preliminary fencing will be installed tomorrow at multiple locations in order to limit possible human exposure to contamination. Among the sites that will be targeted are Centerdale Manor and the property adjacent to Lee Romano field. Additional sites will be visited tomorrow to determine the appropriateness of fencing.

* Beginning tomorrow morning, EPA staff will provide in-depth briefings to impacted residents,

interested community leaders and municipal officials about the ongoing investigation, including the preliminary sampling data. The information will be communicated through door-to-door visits and community meetings. EPA staff will be visiting Centerdale Manor tomorrow morning to meet with residents and take necessary precautions to limit exposure.

* EPA will begin meeting this week with state agencies, community leaders and other interested parties to develop a plan for further sampling of riverfront property. Additional sampling is expected to begin next month, weather permitting.

* Based on preliminary sampling data from last fall, EPA has begun evaluating possible remedial actions. The evaluation is being done in coordination with the R.I. Department of Environmental Management, community groups and other interested parties. The evaluation will be finished after sampling data is verified later this month.

* Continue and expand the aggressive outreach campaign, begin in 1996, to remind the public about the health hazards of eating fish caught in the Woonasquatucket River. Eating fish caught in the river continues to be far-and-away the biggest potential health risk.