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Environmental News

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EPA Announces New Round of Sampling Results for Woonasquatucket River and Centredale Manor

BOSTON - The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency today announced preliminary results of over 600 subsurface soil samples collected this summer from along a half-mile section of the Woonasquatucket River and Centredale Manor area in North Providence.

Preliminary results again confirm high levels of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) and dioxins in surface soils, and revealed that these and other contaminants also are present beneath the surface of the site. Of most concern is the underground presence of high levels of volatile organic compounds (VOCs) which, unlike dioxins, do not adhere to soil, but instead are released when they come into contact with the air or water. The contamination is underground in areas that EPA has fenced or are below the asphalted parking lots on the Centredale Manor and Brook Village properties. The contamination does not pose an increased health risk to the public.

The area of greatest concern continues to be to the south of Centredale Manor in a vegetated wetland and along the riverbank between Centredale Manor and Brook Village.

"These preliminary results from the deeper soil samples further round out our picture of the extent and nature of contamination on the site," said John P. DeVillars, EPA's New England Administrator. "Given the presence of a sensitive population near this site, the new data demands that we evaluate alternative strategies for addressing contamination below the surface that could be an ongoing source of contamination to the river. Capping portions of the site rather than excavating the contaminated areas is the best approach at this time."

"This information further demonstrates that this is a complicated problem that defies an easy solution," said North Providence Mayor A. Ralph Mollis, after meeting with EPA officials yesterday on the new results. "At present, the contamination below the ground is undisturbed, inaccessible and does not pose an immediate risk to the public. I agree that EPA should not begin digging and risk creating an exposure problem if there are other ways to address this issue."

"Protecting the health of residents near this site is my highest priority and if EPA considers it unsafe to excavate soils at Centredale Manor, then we should not be opening pandora's box but should step back and evaluate other options," said State Senator John Celona.

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EPA's next phase of actions at the site will focus on capping and stabilizing the areas where the highest levels of contamination have been found at the surface. The activities are designed to address concerns that flooding might carry additional surface soil contamination into the river. The following activities will begin immediately and take the remainder of the fall construction season as well as the spring to complete:

- Install a protective soil cap over a contaminated area south of the Centredale Manor parking lot.
- Conduct flood evaluation study and flood prevention design work.
- Install a protective soil cap over the area along the river between Centredale Manor and Brook Village.
- Evaluate reconstruction of the tail race behind Centredale Manor.
- Conduct additional sampling and evaluate options for constructing a protective soil cap over the area at the north end of Allendale Pond.

Subsurface soil samples were taken at one foot intervals from the surface down to the groundwater table, which is five to six feet below the surface. Most of these samples were collected in areas where EPA has already taken steps to restrict access. Over 600 samples were collected and tested for dioxin and PCBs. In addition, 25 percent of the samples were also tested for other suspected contaminants, including VOCs, semi-volatile organic compounds, pesticides and metals.

"The new data does not change the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry's (ATSDR's) health recommendations regarding appropriate precautions the public should take to avoid dioxin exposure," DeVillars said. "Residents should continue to use the river responsibly and avoid areas of the Woonasquatucket River where we have identified elevated levels of dioxin in the river soils and sediments. Most importantly, the public should refrain from eating fish caught from the river."

In a related enforcement matter, EPA this week sent notice letters to the Centredale Manor Associates Limited Partnership, Brook Village Associates Limited Partnership and New England Container Company Inc., requesting that they participate in conducting or financing certain cleanup activities at the site.

Under EPA's Superfund program, current or past owners or operators of a site, generators of waste currently located at a site and persons who transported hazardous substances to a site are considered by EPA to be potentially responsible for contamination and the cost of cleaning up that contamination. EPA issued the notice letters to the three parties as the first step in opening the line of communication between the parties and EPA. EPA is hopeful that this step will enable the agency to share the cost of cleanup and further stretch taxpayer dollars devoted to cleanup of hazardous waste sites.

Copies of EPA's action plan are available at the Salvatore Mancini Union Free Library, 1810 Mineral Spring Ave., North Providence, and the Marian J. Mohr Library, 1 Memorial Ave., Johnston.

For health related questions and information, please contact the Family Health Information Line at the R.I. Department of Health at: 1-800-942-7434. The Family Information Line operates Monday through Friday from 8:30 AM to 5:00 PM. On evenings and weekends, callers may leave a name and telephone number. Hotline staff will return the call on the next business day. In addition, health related questions about dioxin can be directed to Dr. David Hewitt at ATSDR's hotline: 1-800-42-ATSDR.

EPA has established a toll-free tips line so that residents who have knowledge about past activities at the site can come forward with information. The toll-free number is: 888-372-7341.

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