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Railyard fumes termed 'public health hazard'

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Toxic vapors probably coming from solvent-tainted groundwater are collecting in crawl spaces in at least a half-dozen homes in Eugene's Trainsong neighborhood, studies show.

On Tuesday, a federally funded health authority termed the vapor concentrations a "public health hazard" because the chemical fumes seeping through the floorboards could - over the years - increase cancer rates for the people who live there.

Health officials are recommending that homeowners get the indoor air in their houses tested to pinpoint how much of the chemical they're actually breathing.

"Action does need to be taken," said Jae Douglas, epidemiologist with the Portland-based Superfund Health Investigation and Education program.

The houses in question are within a couple of blocks of the Union Pacific railyard in west Eugene - just south of where a succession of railroad companies operated a roundhouse where crews maintained, fueled, repaired and washed locomotive engines.

The solvent that splashed onto the ground over a century of operations now forms an extensive underground plume of groundwater pollution that reaches north into the River Road neighborhood and south into the Trainsong neighborhood.

The contaminant is, for example, under the home that Glenda Carroll, who works part time at the Salvation Army, has owned and lived in for 18 years.

"Oh, great. I had to be the lucky one," Carroll, 55, said. "That wouldn't be good. You couldn't even sell your house. Nobody'd want to buy it."

The state Department of Environmental Quality has mapped the plume as part of a voluntary cleanup agreement, first with Southern Pacific Railroad and then, after a 1996 railroad merger, with Union Pacific Railroad. The first of hundreds of groundwater tests started in 1995 and the last set was completed in October 2006.

Union Pacific Railroad is seeking the right remedy for the pollution, said railroad spokesman Mark Davis, who is based in Omaha.

"We're now at another very important step and that is to begin further tests and verification, and to find out what we would want to do is prudent and appropriate. That's a positive step forward," he said.

None of the environmental investigators can say how many residents in the Trainsong neighborhood are affected by solvent vapors seeping through their floorboards.

The state DEQ selected a group of homes to test where the groundwater concentrations of trichloroethylene were the highest. But homes on lots that actually were tested form an irregular checkerboard across the neighborhood.

The testing company was unable to contact some homeowners, couldn't get permission

from others and may have been chased away by dogs at still others, said Greg Aitken, the DEQ project manager.

"It's reasonable to wonder that for every home that was identified, there might be one or two that weren't sampled that - if sampled - could be found to also have a problem in that general area," Aitken said. "It's a reasonable question to ask: Where do you start? Where do you stop?"

It's also unclear what homeowners in the Trainsong neighborhood should do with the health agency warnings about the contaminated groundwater and air in their homes.

Public health officials in the SHINE program say one thing. "Any home that's on the plume at the highest concentrations should contact DEQ and talk to them about whether or not their crawl spaces can be tested," Douglas said.

But DEQ officials say another. "In no circumstances would DEQ be in a position - for various reasons and not the least of which is money - be able to actually do crawl space testing," Aitken said.

The DEQ and the railroad are planning in July to install plastic vapor barriers in the crawl spaces of the half-dozen homes now identified with the worst pollution. They'll do testing in the summer and then again in winter to see if the barriers cut off the vapors arising from the water in the ground. If that's effective, they may test more homes nearby. But that decision won't come until 2008.

Private, in-home air testing would be expensive and probably of limited value because of technical difficulties in conducting it, Aitken said.

Residents of the half-dozen homes in the areas of highest concentration say they are spooked by the news.

Dianna Jones, 58, rented one of the six houses for a dozen years and lived there with her two granddaughters before moving out earlier this year. She began worrying last fall when consultants for the railroad came to measure the fumes in her crawl space.

She said they wouldn't tell her anything.

"I'm thinking, 'They know something I don't know,' " she said. "To me, that's endangerment. They ought to let you know what's going on right from the gate."

Jones, an employment training assistant, said she got eczema all over her feet two years ago. Her 12-year-old granddaughter has unexplained headaches. Her sister, who lives next door to the house that was tested, has ever-worsening lung problems.

"I said, 'I don't care what I do, when I get my income tax (refund) it's going in the bank and I'm getting the heck out of there,' " she said.

Jones moved out of the neighborhood in April. The rental remains empty.

Trisha Nason, a substitute teacher who lives nearby in a rental home that wasn't tested, said she's scared.

The 53-year-old woman was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2005. Through the surgery,

radiation and chemotherapy, she said, the thought that brought her comfort was: "At least it was me and not one of my kids. That helped me a lot," she said.

Health officials calculated the increased cancers related to the vapors in the crawl spaces would be about 3 in 10,000 or 7 in 10,000, depending on the concentrations in any given home.

Nason said it's no comfort for her to hear that any potential increased cancer from the groundwater would take a long time to develop.

"My son that's 10 has lived here his whole life," she said. "I want to move to get away from this."

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## LEARN MORE

### • **Where and when:**

6:30 p.m. Thursday, Red Cross Building, 862 Bethel Drive. Individual questions followed by a presentation of the study.

• **Public comment:** Deadline for submitting comments is June 28. Call 503-731-4025.

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