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Rail yard contamination poses risks

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By Bob Wernick

An assessment released today by the Oregon Department of Human Services Public Health Division shows that groundwater contamination from the Union Pacific Railroad Yard (UPRR) poses some health risk to residents of the Eugene River Road and Trainsong neighborhoods.

The UPRR rail yard has operated continuously in North Eugene for more than 100 years. Work performed there included locomotive maintenance and fueling, railcar repair, wood treatment and a diesel shop.

The Oregon Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) has been working with UPRR since 1994 on the identification and clean-up of industrial chemicals from these activities, including solvents such as trichloroethylene (TCE) and tetrachloroethylene (PCE), which have been detected in the groundwater of nearby neighborhoods. Some of these chemicals have been classified as a probable human carcinogen by the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

The assessment finds that nearby irrigation wells pose no apparent public health hazard if residents use the water to irrigate gardens or hose off outside surfaces, but that alternative water sources should be used for drinking purposes.

It also finds the contaminated groundwater is emitting vapors, air contaminated with TCE and PCE, that are making their way into the crawlspaces and possibly into the living spaces of some homes in these neighborhoods. Inhalation exposure to the air in living spaces is not likely to result in adverse health effects. However, because these vapor levels exceed health guidelines at levels identified as most protective of human health, these levels represent a public health hazard and action is needed to prevent future exposure to residents in these homes.

The DHS Public Health Division Superfund Health Investigation and Education program (SHINE), which made the assessment, also recommends that:

-- Alternative water sources should be used for filling backyard wading pools used by small children.

-- Efforts should continue to identify homes where crawlspace air testing indicates exceedences of health-based standards. These, and the homes already identified as having exceedences, should be tested for indoor air concentrations of PCE and TCE.

-- Vapor barriers and ventilation systems should be installed in homes where vapor concentrations exceed health standards.

-- Efforts to neutralize the source of vapors should continue in order to eliminate a potential source of contamination to irrigation water and indoor air.

The public is invited to comment on the report. The DHS Public Health Division will hold a meeting to discuss the findings of the assessment with residents is scheduled for 6:30 p.m. Thursday, May 31, at the Red Cross Building, 862 Bethel Drive, in Eugene. SHINE staff will be available at 6:30 to talk with residents individually. Formal presentations will begin at 7:15. Representatives from DEQ will also be on hand to provide additional information about the status of the clean-up.

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