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Extensive arsenic and lead pollution revealed

By Robert McClure, Seattle PI

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Report finds smelter fallout at many sites in King County

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NORMANDY PARK -- In her sickbed, weak after chemotherapy knocked her white blood cell count way low, Arlene Wade wondered why she would have lymphatic cancer when there was no history of cancer in her family. Her gardener had died of cancer. Her dog and cat, too.



Then Wade, a Normandy Park resident, heard about people from nearby Vashon and Maury islands being warned about lead and arsenic contamination carried by the wind from Asarco's copper smelter near Tacoma before it closed in 1985.



Arlene Wade holds a map of the wind patterns that carried arsenic from the ASARCO smelter to her Normandy Park neighborhood.

Grant M. Haller/Seattle Post-Intelligencer

Wade repeatedly called City Hall, the local water department and county officials trying to find out if the contamination had spread to her town.

"You can't believe how many people I had to call to get this information," she recalled. "They pass you off like a hot potato."

When she called the local water department in spring 2000 saying she had developed cancer and had some questions, the man on the other end of the line responded: "What do we have here, an Erin Brockovich?"

A few months later, Wade finally got results of tests on soil in her neighborhood -- tests showing potentially harmful readings of arsenic and lead. Arsenic at one place near her house was 13 times higher than the level that warrants a cleanup according to state law. Wade, 59, wonders why residents were not warned.

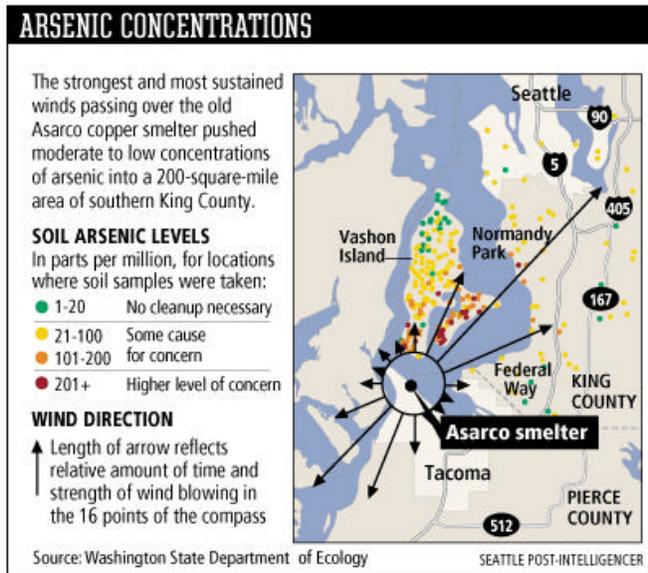
Today, that's supposed to change. The state Department of Ecology made public how much lead and arsenic was detected at 75 locations across a 200-square-mile swath of King County -- from Bellevue to West Seattle to Federal Way to Kent.

In the initial round of samples taken in the fall of 1999 in eight areas in Des Moines, Burien, Normandy Park and Federal Way, all but five of 45 samples came up above the level of arsenic that warrants a cleanup under state law.

Of the 75 places studied between 1999 and 2001, 62 showed arsenic readings above the state cleanup standard, while 13 had lead above the standard.

Contamination is highest in the Normandy Park and Burien areas, lower in West Seattle and Federal Way, even lower farther inland.

With enough exposure, arsenic can cause cancer. Lead can depress children's learning abilities.



Wind-direction maps distributed recently by the Department of Ecology show that the strongest and most sustained winds carried pollution from the smelter directly over Normandy Park, a well-heeled, tree-shaded town at the edge of Puget Sound where Asarco's old smelter seemed far away.

Southern Vashon and Maury islands, where contamination was higher and residents clamored for soil testing, are closer to the old smelter site but not in line for such strong, sustained winds.

Vashon and Maury residents, including some in neighborhoods with readings comparable to those of Normandy Park and environs, were warned in an April 2000 letter from King County Executive Ron Sims to minimize exposure to contaminants.

Why didn't residents of the mainland get the same health warnings?

Dr. Alonzo Plough, health director for Seattle and King County, said issuing a warning based on the initial samples along the coast would have raised more questions from neighboring cities -- questions authorities were in no position to answer without further tests.

"We're not talking about an imminent health hazard," Plough said. "There are stages of appropriate risk communication as to the definitiveness of the science. It would not have been prudent ... to have communicated a characterization of mainland lead and arsenic in soil until we had 75 sites instead of eight."

Elaine Kraft, a spokeswoman for Sims, said he and Plough notified physicians and day care centers in South King County and told newspapers about the situation.

"The executive said the initial sampling on the mainland wasn't sufficient enough to get hysterical or warrant a huge public thing, but it was enough to do further sampling," Kraft said.

The Department of Ecology plans to take more samples in summer 2003 at day care centers, parks and other places where children are likely to come in contact with soil.

Officials say no one should panic.

"This is not a health emergency; it is a health concern," said Marian Abbett, manager of the department's response to the contamination.

It poses little if any danger to drinking water, authorities say, because it is mostly in the top few inches of soil. Drinking-water wells are much deeper.

Department of Ecology spokesman Larry Altose said the yards of many older homes that have not been disturbed since the smelter went off-line in 1985 are likely to be the most contaminated.

That's exactly the kind of place where Arlene Wade, a retired psychotherapist who lives with her husband and son, spent many days doing intense yardwork during the 1980s. She labored alongside her gardener, accompanied by her dog and cat.

Besides gardeners, health officials are most concerned about infants and young children. Their total dose is larger relative to an adult's because of their size, and kids are much more likely to put something contaminated -- fingers, a stick, whatever -- into their mouths.

Wade, a determined, quick-witted woman who was active in civic affairs for years before she contracted cancer, said she was surprised King County officials were not more forthcoming, because she previously found them supportive when cooperating with her on unrelated matters.

She knows that her cancer -- non-Hodgkins lymphoma -- has not been definitively tied to arsenic or lead exposure.

Still, Wade -- whose cancer is in remission -- thinks there may be an unusual number of illnesses in Normandy Park, a town of 6,500. Some neighbors contacted this week agreed, saying at least three residents of a neighborhood near where the highest contamination levels were found had cancer, and three also had Alzheimer's disease.

Residents said they would have preferred to get a letter, like Vashon residents did.

"I think it's something that it's good to advise people about," said resident Sandy Schlyer.

"What I remember was something about Vashon," said neighbor Julie Clearwater, whose brother contracted cancer at age 30 after growing up in the neighborhood, and whose mother died of cancer. "Nothing was said about don't put your hand in the dirt" in Normandy Park.

Mayor John Wiltse and other council members were paid a visit by county health officials about a year ago, he said.

"Our meetings are announced. The subjects are announced. If people are interested in coming to the meeting, they could find out," Wiltse said. "Do I think we've done enough? No, and we're going to rectify that. The thing we've been waiting for is to get meaningful data."

Wiltse said he was unaware of the letter sent to Vashon and Maury residents, and doesn't know why those warnings could not have also been sent to his constituents.

"That's a good question," he said.

Officials said they have no plans to study southern King County to determine if contamination has increased cancer rates. A similar study on Vashon and Maury islands, where contamination levels are similar or higher than those on the mainland, was unable to establish a link between arsenic exposure and increased rates of cancer.

There is strong evidence that arsenic exposure, in sufficient doses, causes cancers of the bladder, skin and lung. Statistics suggest arsenic may also be linked to cancers of the liver, kidney and prostate, but it's never been proven to cause those.

There is also no indication arsenic causes Alzheimer's, said University of Washington toxicologist David Eaton, who served on a National Academy of Sciences panel that studied arsenic in drinking water.

While some scientists are concerned about low levels of arsenic in soil, Eaton says he does not believe residents need to worry much unless the level of arsenic in the soil around their home exceeds 200 parts of arsenic for every million parts of soil. Only one of the 75 mainland locations tested that high, and then only on one sample. It was at a park near Wade's house.

"It's not that any exposure to arsenic will give you these kinds of cancer," Eaton said. "It depends on how much and how long. ... It's kind of like playing the lottery. If you buy one ticket, you're less likely to win than if you buy 100,000."

"Most of the population is not at obvious acute risk" at the levels being unveiled on the mainland, said UW environmental engineer John Kissel, president-elect of the International Society of Exposure Analysis. On the other hand, he said, "We can't be absolutely certain that someone is not at risk if they're exposed to that for a long time. ... If we had our choice, we wouldn't have anybody living in soils with those kinds of dangers."

There are a number of ways people can ingest or inhale dirt, researchers say. Dust is stirred up by the wind or cars. Someone working in the yard might smoke, eat or pop a stick of gum into his or her mouth. Or people may track dirt into the house on their shoes, and then inhale it when it is stirred up.

Cities can apply for state reimbursement for up to one-half of their cleanup costs, but private landowners are on their own.

The Department of Ecology plans to seek reimbursement from Asarco for costs of testing and helping cities clean up. But that may be difficult, because Asarco, with \$1 billion-plus in cleanup obligations around the country already, faces \$450 million in outstanding loans and is \$86 million short of collateral needed to cover them.

The company has bitterly opposed state requirements to clean up the soil around an old Asarco smelter in Everett, saying the 20 parts per million in the state standard for arsenic is too stringent. That translates into a risk of 30 people getting cancer for every 1 million people who are exposed over the course of a lifetime.

At Asarco's smelter site near Tacoma, where the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is in charge, Asarco must clean up all soil measuring 230 parts per million or greater -- which was identified in a science journal article several years ago as the laxest residential standard for arsenic cleanups anywhere in the country. The 230 parts per million translates to one cancer case for every 2,000 people exposed.

The southern King County situation illustrates how the state and federal toxic-cleanup laws are ill-suited to dealing with moderate levels of contamination spread across large areas. The laws were targeted at relatively small areas with egregious

contamination, such as the land immediately around the old smelter.

Still, Wade thinks authorities had enough information to at least warn the shoreside communities based on the samples taken in 1999.

"If they're going to be intimidated and controlled by the corporations that are polluting our country," Wade said, "the least the government can do is get the information to us."

PROTECT YOURSELF

To minimize harmful exposure to arsenic and lead:

- Frequently wash hands, pets and anything that children put in their mouths, such as toys and pacifiers.
- Remove shoes outside the home. Keep dirt out of the house.
- Damp-mop and dust frequently.
- Wash hands before preparing food, eating or smoking.
- Keep children and pets away from exposed soil. Cover soil with grass, wood chips or gravel.
- Wear a mask in dusty areas.
- Wash vegetables grown in gardens carefully before eating. Peel root vegetables.
- Wear gloves and shoes while gardening.
- Dampen soils before digging to reduce dust.
- Add clean soils such as compost and mulch to your garden, and consider using a raised bed.

For more information: call King County health officials at 206-296-4692, or use the Web: www.metrokc.gov/health/tsp/arseniclead.htm.

Source: Public Health-Seattle & King County

Friday, January 16, 2004

Boundary is expanded in search for arsenic and lead pollution

Seattle Post-Intelligencer Staff and News Services

OLYMPIA -- The search for arsenic and lead pollution from an old Tacoma-area copper smelter is expanding into Thurston and Kitsap counties, Seattle, parts of northern King County, the Gig Harbor Peninsula and south Pierce County, the state Department of Ecology said Wednesday.

"We expect to find fairly low concentrations of arsenic and lead because the boundary of contamination will be some distance from the original smelter stack in Ruston," said Marian Abbett, the department's project manager for soil studies in the smelter area.

Asarco, the last company that owned the smelter, also produced arsenic before shutting down in 1985. The two main contaminants at the site are arsenic, a cancer-causing byproduct of copper smelting, and lead, which can slow brain development in children.

A one-mile radius surrounding the smelter was declared a federal Superfund site in 1983. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency is overseeing the cleanup, which officials say could cost as much as \$200 million by the time it's complete.

Ecology and local health departments will ask property owners for permission to sample soil on sites that have not been disturbed since the smelter began operating in the 1890s, including forested areas and some residential lots.

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