

EPA website focuses on Velsicol remediation

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CH2M Project Manager Theo von Wallmenich holds one of the photoionization detectors that will measure volatile organic compounds and other gases at monitoring stations in St. Louis. (Herald photo – Horvath)

By Rosemary Horvath Staff Writer

An Environmental Protection Agency website provides a firsthand look at the major cleanup processes underway on the Velsicol Chemical Superfund site in St. Louis.

According to EPA Community Involvement Coordinator Diane Russell, EPA contractors have finished drilling the 1-acre area known as Area 1 where 276 underground heaters have been installed to a depth of

about 30 feet.

These instruments will heat the soil to the boiling point of water. The steam and chemicals in the soil will turn into a vapor and will be captured and treated on-site.

For videos and detailed explanations visit the website <http://www.epa.gov/superfund/velsicol-chemical-michigan>.

On the menu bar is a link to Russell's videos where the on-site treatment system is visible with Russell explaining the process.

Meanwhile this week, the nonprofit independent digital online magazine "Undark: Truth, Beauty, Science" released a year's investigation of the Michigan Chemical plant history, the Velsicol cleanup and the connection between the PBB once manufactured at the plant that had been inadvertently substituted for animal feed and distributed throughout Michigan.

The magazine piece entitled "Epigenetics and the Poisoning of Michigan" explores the research undertaken by Emory University researchers and their challenges.

Virginia freelance writer Carrie Arnold interviewed St. Louis resident Jim Hall who suspects his illness, that of relatives and the cause of death of his infant daughter may be linked to PBB exposure.

Arnold also interviewed Alma College professors Murray Borrello and Ed Lorenz, who along with Jane Keon and others, formed the Pine River Superfund Citizens Task Force that has pushed for decades removal of chemical site's hazardous contaminants and at all the properties poisoned. An Emory University research team led by research scientist and environmental epidemiologist Dr. Michelle Marcus conducted a second community meeting at the Mid-Michigan District [Health](#) Department a few weeks ago.

Their mission was to recruit men the age of grandfathers who had been exposed to PBB while their wives had not.

Emory has a Michigan PBB Research Registry that will hold an online

community meeting Jan. 16 from 7 to 8:30 p.m.

To join, register at www.PBBregistry.emory.edu and click the meeting link.

A health questionnaire is available at www.bit.ly/pbbstudyhq.

Officials from EPA and Michigan Department of Environmental Quality meet the third Wednesday of the month with the Pine River Superfund Citizen Task Force at St. Louis City Hall.

The public is encouraged to attend.

At a recent task force meeting, Russell, EPA Remedial Project Manager Tom Alcamo and engineers reviewed the technology employed at the Velsicol plant site.

Theo von Wallmenich is the senior project manager with the global engineering company CH2M hired by EPA to design the air monitoring plan. He showed the task force membership one of the photoionization detectors that will measure volatile organic compounds and other gases at monitoring stations during the thermal treatment process at the Superfund site. CH2M prepared the air monitoring plan.

There will be seven monitoring stations. The detectors will be used in the work zone perimeters and 100 times more sensitive than any other device at analyzing chemicals.

“We’re trying to be extra protective,” van Wallmenich explained. “But we don’t expect DDT to volatilize or be a particulate (in the air).”

The system has an extensive number of controls that are monitored 24/7.

However, should there be some sort of release, monitors will signal a problem in less than 30 minutes and can immediately react to a pressure leak.

Wallmenich added there are multiple redundancies built into the system plus the fact human operators live nearby and will react without delay.

The city of St. Louis subscribes to the NIXLE alert system that anyone can sign up for to be notified of an emergency.

Wallmenich expressed confidence the treatment process will not require an evacuation plan if something should go amiss.

Alcamo explained the treated groundwater will be released to the Pine River. For this to happen, MDEQ required an application detailing specific discharge information.

The project must adhere to regulations the same as the city discharging treated wastewater into the river.

There are temperature requirements because warm water discharged into the river would stimulate algae growth, Devon Phelan said.

Phelan is the project manager with Terra Therm Inc. She is responsible for the management of the design and construction of the thermal remediation project.

The city built an overhead electrical circuit to supply the high amount of power needed for the thermal remedy of underground heater wells.

Construction of the system is on schedule and is expected to be operational sometime in January once air monitoring confirms that safety measures are protecting workers and the community, Russell said.