St. Louis residential neighborhood cleanup complete

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by Greg Nelson
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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has finally wrapped up remediation work in one St. Louis neighborhood that has been ongoing for the past couple of years.

Work at 42 homes in the contaminated area that had to be postponed last year are now finished.

The EPA sampled 134 yards in a nine square block section of the city near the former Velsicol Chemical Co. plant site and found 99 to be contaminated with elevated levels of DDT and PBB.

Ten city properties, including alleyways and under streets, were also cleaned up.

EPA contractors removed 17,500 tons of contaminated soil in the area this year, and a total of 50,000 tons for the entire project, EPA Project Manager Tom Alcamo told members of the Pine River Superfund Citizens Task Force during a recent meeting.

The neighborhood that underwent remediation included properties from M-46 on the south to the plant site on the north, and from Watson Street on the west to Mill Street on the east.

A few areas required extensive excavation, removing up to six feet of soil.

Some drainage issues in the neighborhood also had to be addressed.

Work at five homes on the east side of Pine Street north of M-46 will likely carry over to next year, as well as one unpaved block of West Center Street near the former plant site, Alcamo said.

The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality plans to do some verification tests now that the EPA has completed its work in the neighborhood.

No more sampling is scheduled to take place.

Cleanup in that area has been ongoing since 2013 when excavation of about a dozen properties on Bankson, Center, Watson and Delaware streets were completed.

Those were the locations where orange snow fences had been placed several years ago to mark the polluted sections of yards.

However, additional soil sampling and testing was conducted in the area that and found the contamination was more widespread, which led to the most recent cleanup.

Some locations showed they contained 25 parts per million of DDT. Five ppm is considered enough for EPA cleanup standards.

The new study was done after more dead robins stated to be discovered in the area.

Because tests showed the birds were found to die from DDT poisoning the EPA was able to get funding for the work.

Also, more than 200 trees in the neighborhood were removed and all have

been replaced.

Residents who had their yards remediated will receive a letter from the EPA stating that their property had been cleaned up to levels acceptable for use.

Plant site cleanup

Although the Pine River Superfund Citizens Task Force has lobbied for years for complete excavation, the EPA has decided that its first remediation efforts will be “in situ” thermal treatment, a process where the soil is heated by electricity which “volatizes” the contaminants that are then captured with a filtering system.

Three bids for the work have been received.

The plan also calls for two areas of the 52-arce parcel to be excavated

A preliminary design has been completed for that work, however, bids won’t be sought until funding for the project is approved.

Whether or not money is available to begin that work won’t be determined until the EPA’s Prioritization Panel, the board that has the authority to approve or deny funding, makes a decision sometime in the spring.

If the panel gives its OK, work would begin in 2016.

Alcamo told the task force that he would not be surprised if the Prioritization Panel recommended $20 million each for the in situ treatment and the excavation.

If the EPA gets the money to proceed a new entrance to the plant site would be installed on M-46 and possibly a traffic light. That would keep trucks hauling contaminated soil from driving through residential neighborhoods.

The estimated price tag for complete remediation of the entire plant property is $374 million, which includes installing a groundwater pump and treat system along with factoring in 50 years of operation and maintenance at the site.

Currently, about 20,000 gallons of contaminated groundwater is being collected and disposed of each week at the site.

The entire remediation process is expected to take several years to complete.