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Residents seek better communication on pits

Christopher James 12 hrs ago



For two days, the Environmental Protection Agency conducted one-on-one interviews with area residents in Highlands to update and finalize its Community Involvement Plan for the San Jacinto River Waste Pits.

The EPA conducted about 15 one-on-one meetings Tuesday and Wednesday, giving residents the opportunity to express any site-related needs, concerns and expectations. EPA staff also wanted to know how the community prefers to receive information regarding the cleanup process.

“We want input on how EPA can enhance what we’re currently doing when it comes to outreach efforts in cleaning up the site,” Community Involvement Coordinator Janetta Coats said.

While there were a limited number of slots open for one-on-one meetings, about a dozen residents attended a roundtable discussion Wednesday to express their ideas as to how the EPA can better engage with the surrounding community. And attendees expressed the need for better communication between the EPA and the outlying neighborhoods.

Residents said the EPA needs to reach out to HOAs, local civic groups and possibly even school districts because much of the community is still unaware the waste pits even exist, as many residents in the area still fish by the site.

“The dioxin — one of the deadliest chemicals known to man — is sitting right there and that’s bigger than ‘don’t eat the fish,’” Pamela Bonta said. “And one or two billboards would do a lot of good for letting people who don’t read the paper, don’t listen to Fox News and don’t go online.”

“If they’re driving down (Interstate 10) you can’t miss that billboard,” she added.

The EPA also inquired about health concerns in the area, which in previous years has yielded a large number cancer clusters in parts of eastern Harris County, including Highlands.

“As of recent, besides all the (area) cancer and everything, there’s a high rate of endometriosis in women, including my daughter,” Bonta said. “There is a large population of that in the surrounding areas.”

Endometriosis is a painful condition that causes the lining of the womb to behave abnormally and grow outside the uterus. Although the exact cause of endometriosis isn’t known, studies have shown it could be hereditary or due to environmental factors — namely the presence of dioxins in the environment.

In addition to providing updates on the progress of the site, attendees want the agency to express how toxic dioxin truly really is. Residents said they need to present the facts in ways that people can relate, like the use of Agent Orange during the Vietnam War. Agent Orange, which contains dioxin, was the most commonly used herbicide by the U.S during the Vietnam War. It was later proven to cause serious health issues — including cancer, birth defects, rashes and severe psychological and neurological problems.

“I don’t think people understand how dangerous that site is, and I think it’s being taken too lightly,” Bonta said.

In terms of distributing information, residents suggested utilizing the five most distributed publications in the area on a reoccurring basis and recommended exploiting social media, email and mailboxes.

“Reach an agreement with those publications and publish something once or twice a month, or whatever it may be,” Rodrigo Cantu, a lawyer with Lone Star Legal Aid who represents a number of residents individually, said. “Notify (residents) that there is a Superfund site here and this is the stage of remediation and public participation that we’re currently in right now.”

“It’s an old fashion way, but it’s a good way to cover all your bases,” he added. “And if you were to do it frequently enough, you could be pretty sure that you’re going to reach a wider audience.”

The EPA is currently working on the final draft of the Community Involvement Plan (CIP) for the waste pits, which will serve as a guide for public engagement throughout the Superfund process.

“Once we complete the interview process, a comprehensive summary will be provided on input from all of those that participated,” Coats said.

The San Jacinto River Waste Pits are a series of toxic dioxin-filled pits along the San Jacinto River, located just north of the Interstate 10 bridge.

In April, the EPA announced a \$115 million cleanup plan for the waste pits.

For more information visit www.epa.gov/tx/sjrwp or call 1-800-533-3508.