

EPA Has Few Answers for Residents at Black Leaf Community Meeting



Credit Erica Peterson / WFPL

The sign on the fence surrounding the former Black Leaf Chemical site in Park Hill.

BY ERICA PETERSON

Many of the people living near the former Black Leaf Chemical site in Louisville's Park Hill neighborhood now know their yards are contaminated. But they want to know what the health risks are and whether the federal government will clean up their property. They got few answers at a meeting tonight.

The Environmental Protection Agency tested 51 homes near the former Black Leaf Chemical plant, and found [all had some levels of contamination](#). The tests revealed traces of lead, arsenic, pesticides and polyaromatic hydrocarbons, like benzo(a)pyrene, a possible carcinogen. Nine of the homes had higher levels—but all were somewhere in the range of what the EPA considers the acceptable risk range.

Tension in the meeting was palpable, and residents were angry. People who knew their yards were contaminated wanted to know what long-term health problems exposure to these chemicals could cause. They wanted to know what the agency would do about the problem. Several raised questions about whether the contamination would have been addressed more quickly if it had been in a more affluent and whiter neighborhood.

“If they're going to do something, they need to do it before everybody dies out, and they won't have to worry about anything,” Barbara Matthews said. Matthews' property is contaminated. She and her son Lee are frustrated at the lack of answers. No one can explain what the cumulative health effects of living near the site could be, and they've been exposed to contaminated soil and water for years.

“The water comes over the wall,” she said. “Like a waterfall.”

“When we were growing up we used to play in that water,” Lee Matthews said. “Making boats out of paper and racing sticks down the alley. We were all in that water, we always just figured it was regular rainwater. Come to find out years ago. What are we playing in? Toxic waste.”

EPA On-Scene Coordinator Art Smith tried to address residents’ concerns, but could only offer advice like to use raised beds for vegetable gardens to reduce exposure to contaminated soil. The agency isn’t sure whether the contamination was spread by air or water, and if it’s spread by air, a raised vegetable bed wouldn’t help matters. So residents were told if they want to be absolutely sure, they shouldn’t grow vegetables. In a neighborhood plagued by poor access to fresh food, that didn’t go over well.

Tom FitzGerald of the Kentucky Resources Council says it’s hard to bridge the gulf between what people in contaminated homes want and what the EPA can actually deliver with its risk-based assessments.

“The regulators are dealing with this world of ‘what is the level at which we need to require somebody to clean up the contamination,’” FitzGerald said. “And the residents are coming from a position of ‘you have no right to leave any of it on my property.’”

EPA officials stressed that even at the most contaminated sites, levels of contaminants are still relatively low. The agency initially resisted having the community meeting this month, because there’s still little additional information it could give. Still missing are key issues like whether the agency will clean up the properties and what company will be held responsible.