

Danger in the land | Toxic plume spreads under Newark; 8 families must leave

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NEWARK, Ohio — Ever since she learned what was lurking beneath the soil, Heather Puryear has been afraid of her home. She put a filter on the kitchen faucet, let the tomatoes out back rot on the vine. She cries thinking about what her five children might have been exposed to since they moved into their Licking County house nearly two years ago.

“We had no clue,” said Puryear, 31, standing on her porch and watching her boys toss a ball with the neighbor kids. “I’m scared to know what we’ve been breathing in.”

Officials monitoring the site of a decades-old, underground toxic plume say they don’t yet know how much, if any, gas has leaked to the surface and into eight Newark homes. But concern about rising toxicity levels in the area is forcing Puryear’s family and those living at seven other properties to vacate by next year.

“I just want to get my kids out,” said Puryear, who’d rather not wait the months it will take to negotiate a price for her home, which she and her husband bought for \$80,000. “No one’s telling us how harmful it is.”

The problem is actually an old one, something that the Ohio Environmental Protection Agency has been monitoring in Newark for more than two decades.

From 1940 to 1987, the Ohio Department of Transportation kept a test lab and equipment-maintenance facility on nearly 3 acres west of Rt. 79. During that time, ODOT used a powerful solvent at the site called trichloroethylene, or TCE, to separate asphalt and to clean grease from truck engines, said ODOT District 5 Deputy Director Joe Rutherford. It wasn’t thought to be harmful at the time.

But TCE turned out to be an environmental scourge. Health officials say it can cause anything from skin rash and headaches to kidney damage and cancer. At the ODOT site, the TCE crept deep into the soil. Getting rid of it has been a \$12 million exercise in futility.

“Nothing that we’ve tried has been as successful as hoped,” Rutherford said.

ODOT tried trucking out soil to have it cleaned and returned, only to learn that the TCE was already in the ground water, 14 to 30 feet below the surface. They tried injecting a calcium peroxide product into the water to break up the TCE, but that didn’t work, either.

This summer, they noticed that the TCE plume, which had long been stationary beneath the old site, seemed to be spreading southeastward toward Rt. 79 and two clusters of homes, Rutherford said. The Ohio EPA recorded rising TCE concentrations, the highest numbers they'd seen in the area, spokeswoman Erin Strouse said.

ODOT called a meeting with the owners and tenants of eight properties on James and S. Pine streets and broke the news this month. They wanted to test the quality of the indoor air, and they wanted to buy and demolish everyone's property. Owners were stunned.

Heather Price, 29, whose family of six lives across the street from Puryear, said she had mixed emotions about the announcement. Her family needed to move to a bigger home anyway, she said, and her children are excited to go.

"But I'm sad to see that the house is going to be torn down," Price said, while feeding a bottle to her infant son on their porch. "We made a lot of memories here, and we put a lot of work into this house."

Canisters were placed inside homes last week to collect air samples, and results are expected in about a month, Rutherford said. No matter the outcome, ODOT plans to proceed with the acquisition and demolition of the homes. The agency has about \$1.5 million to spend on the process — testing air, buying homes and tearing them down, and relocating residents — and hopes to start moving families out before the end of the year.

Both Strouse of the EPA and Rutherford said they had no reason to believe the TCE posed an immediate risk to residents. No one drinks from the ground water, and toxicity hazards at this point are based only on computer models.

"If we really had any indication that there was a health issue, we'd get them out of there yesterday," Rutherford said.

But since the announcement, some of the residents are starting to question their own health problems. Puryear said her eldest daughter, normally a healthy teenager, has had pneumonia twice since they moved to James Street. Farther down the road, at a home that's not set to be demolished, a husband and wife both suffer from chronic kidney disease.

"What are the chances of both of us having this?" said Shirley Crawford, 73, who has lived next to the ODOT property for 37 years and had never before heard about TCE.

Crawford lives two doors down from one of the homes that will be torn down, and she's worried not only about the value of her property after the demolition but about whether the plume will continue to spread.

"I want to know whether it's safe for me to live here or not," she said.