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New sign up period opens for soil testing

Over 1,500 Blackwell property owners are participating in the Phelps Dodge soil sampling program during the past year and results of that sampling has led company officials to extend the soil sampling sign-up period for another three months.

According to Phelps officials, preliminary results indicate that about a quarter of participating properties sampled to date have at least one area with metal concentrations above the cleanup levels set by the state.

The new sign-up period starts Jan. 28 and will run through April 30. Property owners wishing to participate can come to the Blackwell Community Outreach office at 123 East Blackwell Ave., or call 363-1202.

"The preliminary results suggest that sampling should occur throughout all of Blackwell, including properties whose owners have not yet signed up for sampling," said Jim Telle, company spokesman.

Much of the contamination is being found in alleys or driveways.

We do not know to what extent smelter-related activities contributed to what we are finding. There are other significant, known sources of lead in Blackwell that we may be picking up through our sampling program, notably lead-based paint. The company, however, will live up to its commitment to clean up properties where levels exceed the ODEQ cleanup standard through the supplemental sampling program regardless of the source of the lead," said Telle.

"We want to get as much of the town sampled as possible," said Candy Thomas, Blackwell Community Outreach coordinator.

She pointed out that property owner cooperation is required to allow sampling teams to work in the alleys as well as yards and driveways.

"Every property goes back halfway across the alleys," she said. "Many people think that the city owns those alleys but that is not true. We have to have the property owner give us permission to conduct the sampling program there."

Thomas pointed out that there are some misconceptions about the program.

"Some people think that if we find contamination, we are going to destroy their yards. If it is required, we will remove the contaminated soil and replace it with clean soil and landscape the surface as well as before if not better. If a fence is damaged, we will repair or replace it. If shrubs have to be removed, we will replace them," she added.

All work is being done with Phelps-Dodge picking up the cost. In 1999 Phelps purchased Blackwell Zinc Company, the responsible entity.

"It is vital that we get as much participation as possible during this period," she said. "There are some areas that we have tested where we see neighboring properties that really should be tested to determine whether the soil should be replaced."

One of the problems facing the sampling crews is the absentee property owners.

"We have some properties that have owners living outside of Blackwell and out of state. This means we have to work with the County Clerk to find the owners and contact them to get permission to do the work."

Thomas said the program has a long-term benefit to property owners.

"Many people are not aware that the soil one to two feet down could have levels of metals that should be cleaned up. Properties may have been purchased long after the smelter was gone and the current owners may not know the history of the property. "

Catherine Castaned, Blackwell Community outreach Project manager, said that Shaw Environmental is operating with four teams doing the sampling and will continue, "hopefully until we get every parcel of property in Blackwell tested."

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