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Blackwell Residents Can Sign Up for Soil Sampling

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BLACKWELL — The Blackwell Community Outreach Office, located at 123 East Blackwell Ave., is now registering residents for free soil sampling.

Catherine Castaneda, community outreach project manager for the Shaw Group, confirmed Thursday that soil testing should begin in mid June and at this time the company's plan is to only test top soil.

Castaneda explained to Candy Thomas of Phelps Dodge who explained that Shaw Environmental is following the state mandated program guidelines set fourth in the record of decision, a public document on record at Blackwell City Hall and at the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality.

Thomas said if tested soil exceeds the guidelines set in the record of decision, then testing on homes could be conducted.

Phelps Dodge leased space at the former Arkla Gas Building, and the office will serve as the company's Blackwell headquarters for the supplemental soil sampling program and construction of a state-approved groundwater treatment facility.

The outreach office is a team effort between Phelps Dodge and the Shaw Group, an environmental consulting firm. Shaw will schedule and conduct voluntary residential and commercial soil sampling at no cost to Blackwell property owners.

"We are committed to being accessible to the Blackwell public and providing information as the soil sampling and

groundwater plant projects move forward," said Castaneda.

"To make it efficient for residents, we've streamlined the process and have all the paperwork on hand and signing up only takes a few minutes," she said.

In 1999, Phelps Dodge Corp. bought the parent company of the Blackwell Zinc Company smelter that closed in 1974.

Phelps Dodge never operated the smelter or contributed to any soil or groundwater contamination that resulted from operations at the facility.

Phelps Dodge has worked under the oversight of ODEQ to ensure that Blackwell Zinc continues to meet its responsibility to address environmental impacts from the former smelter.

Recently a group of attorneys from Texas told residents that the city's top soil is contaminated with lead and arsenic based on environmental tests conducted by an environmental team from College Station, Texas.

They believe the contamination is a direct result of the smelter.

ODEQ did not oversee the sampling performed by the environmentalist.

On April 10 Phelps Dodge hosted an open house in an attempt to address concerns and questions.

The Oklahoma State Department of Health was also present at the open house displaying charts showing that 3.6 percent of the children tested in Blackwell showed elevated blood lead levels, while across the state 0.9 percent of the children tested showed higher levels of lead.

OSDH believes the elevated levels reflect the large number of houses in Blackwell built prior to 1950 that contain lead paint.

Texas attorney Nelson Roach of the firm Nix, Patterson and Roach then held an open forum for citizens.

Roach and Dr. Rod O' Conner, Chemical Consulting Services, College Station, presented a slide show consisting of findings based on the independent study commissioned by the law firm and data obtained from the

OSDH.

"OSDH officials know that there is no known safe level of exposure to lead," said Roach.

"OSDH officials know, or should know, that there is significant scientific research in peer-reviewed, published journals that conclusively establishes that blood lead levels in excess of 5 micrograms/deciliters, can be extremely detrimental to small children and that damage to children's brains may in fact begin at levels as low as 3 micrograms/deciliters."

Roach finds OSDH's claims that the elevated blood lead levels in Blackwell are likely due to lead based-paint in older homes disturbing.

He believes this claim is in conflict to the fact that the Blackwell smelter was once the largest zinc smelter in the United States and that during its operation there were no pollution controls to remove pollutants from the emissions.

Roach adds that to his knowledge no evaluation has ever been conducted to quantify the amount of zinc, lead, arsenic and cadmium emitted annually from the smelter and that to his knowledge none of the homes in Blackwell has ever been remediated on the interior to remove harmful household dust.

Several homes that the firm had tested were built after 1980, which is after the U.S. government's ban on lead in paint went into effect. At least one home tested was built as recently as five years ago, and tests showed lead in it's house dust exceeded EPA/HUD standards.

"The OSDH has not conducted a lead isotope analysis of the paint, mini-blinds and cookware and compared that to a lead isotope analysis of the lead found in Blackwell soil and house dust," said Roach.

"The OSDH has not conducted a lead-to-arsenic ratio analysis of the paint, mini-blinds and cookware and compared that to a lead-to-arsenic ratio analysis of the lead found in Blackwell soil and house dust. They have not provided any evidence to support an exposure mechanism for the children of Blackwell to the allegedly harmful lead-based paint. And, finally, OSDH has offered no explanation for homes built after 1980 that contain lead in house dust that significantly exceeds EPA/HUD standards."

Roach said his firm has conducted lead isotope and lead-

to-arsenic ratio analyses and can confidently state that lead-based paint is not likely as a significant contributing factor to the lead in the house dust and soil in Blackwell.

OSDH recently released a press release state-wide stating that per protocols, the OSDH has conducted home inspections of five children's homes in Blackwell since 1994. Of those five homes, four were tested for soil contamination and found to be negative. Soil samples were not taken at the fifth home. In three of the five homes, lead-based paint was determined to be the exposure source using x-ray and paint chip sampling techniques.

In one case, exposure sources were both lead-based paint as well as vinyl mini-blinds, as determined by using x-ray and dust wipe methodologies.

And in the final case, using x-ray techniques, ceramic cooking pottery was found to be the exposure source.

Citizens who would like to have their top soil tested for contaminants are encouraged to contact the outreach office provided by Phelps Dodge and Shaw Industries.

Office hours are from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday, and from 8 a.m. to noon on Saturdays.

Phelps Dodge wants to remind residents of the April 16 through July 16 period to sign up for sampling.

For more information you may call the office at 580-363-1202 or the toll-free number 866-466-8924 for those outside of Blackwell.

Parents who would like their children's blood lead levels tested can contact the Kay County Health Department at 580-363-5520.

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