



THE PONCA CITY NEWS

PONCA CITY, OKLAHOMA

Blackwell Residents Hear New Answers On Lead Contamination



Editor's note: This is the second of two stories concerning the forum held Thursday night. The first story appeared in the April 13 edition of the Ponca City News.

By SHARON ROWEN

News Staff Writer

BLACKWELL — Blackwell residents gathered for a second time last week on Thursday to obtain information on lead and arsenic contamination reported throughout the town.

Tuesday Phelps Dodge hosted an open house and presented information and an opportunity to sign up for free soil sampling.

Thursday attorney Nelson Roach and Dr. Rod O'Conner, Chemical Consulting Services out of College Station, Texas spoke to residents and answered their questions concerning findings gathered by them and the Oklahoma State Department of Health.

Roach commented on the procedure Phelps Dodge is using to sign people up for testing.

Roach believes that Phelps Dodge is asking for people to sign up for testing in an effort to elicit low results. He used methods used by the U.S. Census Bureau as an example.

"If every 10 years when we took a census, if someone from the government took an ad out in the paper and said we would like for you to come by our office and fill out a census form, how many people do you think would fill out a census form," asked Roach.

"Considering the health hazard of contamination that

Phelps Dodge is responsible for in Blackwell, don't you think that they ought to at least employ a technique that is designed to insure compliance that is at least as good as what the U.S. Census Department does," asked Roach.

"Your soil may not be that contaminated, but your house dust may well be. So by doing it the way they (Phelps Dodge) are doing it they are not solving that problem."

He commented on the story that Phelps Dodge offered a High Efficiency Particulate Air (HEPA) filter vacuum to residents to use in an effort to clean up their homes.

Roach told citizens that they were not responsible for the contamination of their homes and that they should not be responsible for cleaning it up.

"You are not trained to decontaminate your house," said Roach. "Phelps Dodge is responsible for cleaning up your house. They have a responsibility to have trained professionals to come into your house and decontaminate your house."

Dr. O'Conner touched on the soil sampling method Phelps Dodge plans to use.

"Several areas of the upper part of the soil needs to be looked at," said O'Conner.

"If you want to see what the minimum risk is then take a whole bunch of samples, six inches deep, a foot deep, you mix them all together and you dig some of that out. For every hot spot you have, you have diluted them. If your goal is to tell people there is nothing to worry about and that their soil isn't contaminated and that your house doesn't have to be looked at, that is the way to do it."

O'Conner added that if a family has a high level of arsenic in their home today, then they have been exposed.

"If that home is cleaned up tomorrow you have already been exposed," he said.

"Arsenic is linked to diabetes, neurological problems, practically every type of cancer we are aware of, heart disease, circulatory problems and in many cases the latency period before you begin to show symptoms of any these is 5, 10, or 15 years."

"With respect to lead, if you were born after the smelter closed, but your mother lived in this community while the smelter was operating and she was inhaling clouds of dust that you could see in the air, the lead from that

exposure went into her bones and during pregnancy the lead is reabsorbed out of the bone and into the blood stream and can affect the child."

With that Blackwell residents stepped to a microphone and begin asking questions.

Darlene Becker asked if lead affects adults.

O'Conner said yes and that the older one gets the worse it is.

Another resident asked about Cadmium in the well water.

Roach said that a well that was not affected five years ago may be contaminated today.

Wheeler Cobb asked if Blackwell data had been compared with data from Bartlesville and Picher.

Roach said that they had not collected data on Bartlesville and that he believed in 2000, data indicated the elevated blood lead levels in Picher was 11 percent, higher than Blackwell.

"Picher is as bad as you're going to get," said Roach.

"Picher was 11 percent and Blackwell is 3.6 percent."

Another resident asked what happens if they clean their property but a neighbor doesn't.

The answer was wind and rain erosion would re-contaminate the clean property.

Another resident asked if there are filters that could be put on air conditioners to help with the lead contamination.

O'Conner referred to a HEPA filter but stressed once again that residents are not qualified to clean their homes.

"I dealt with a home where they had 15ppm arsenic," said O'Conner.

"Less than the average in Blackwell. We brought professional cleaners in for that home and the cleaning bill was \$15,000 in order to bring people in with protective masks, petition it off. I don't recommend that you do cleaning that might stir up dust."

Roach commented that "Blackwell is going to live or die

based on Phelps Dodge's responsibility to clean the town up."

Another resident commented that her family moved to Blackwell four years ago and that her family has spent \$15,986 on doctor's bills during that time.

She asked what the community can do since the people feel Phelps Dodge is not doing anything.

Roach suggested that residents band together and set aside their differences with city leaders and stand together.

"Even though you all are lead poisoned, you all are good folks," said Roach jokingly.

Dale Oard asked if the attorneys recommend that people sign up for the soil sampling that Phelps Dodge is offering.

Roach said under their current protocol no, but if they would do it right then yes.

Jim Telle, Phelps Dodge said Friday that the newly launched community outreach program has received 80 signups for soil sampling, accounting for more than 100 properties in Blackwell.

Telle added that Phelps Dodge will address interior household dust at properties where yards are being cleaned up.

"Rarely noted is that Phelps Dodge has been working in the Blackwell community for seven years, and we completed the previous cleanup of yards to the satisfaction of the ODEQ," said Telle.

He stressed that the supplemental sampling program currently under way is not a second mandated cleanup, but a voluntary one and that it is designed to reach people who did not participate in the previous sampling program.

"Phelps Dodge is disappointed that Blackwell residents, as well as Oklahoma state agencies, have been subjected to distortions of facts from a Texas law firm that arrived in town several weeks ago," said Telle.

"As a corporate citizen of Blackwell, Phelps Dodge has questions about the law firm's purpose in fostering fear among residents. Has the Texas law firm invested in

Blackwell by opening its own outreach office? Outside of the fear tactics and the repudiation of well-accepted state environmental and health information, does the Texas law firm plan to work cooperatively with appropriate authorities on behalf of Blackwell residents? Does the newly arrived Texas law firm have a standing commitment, like Phelps Dodge's, about managing Blackwell's environmental issues for the betterment of the community? Phelps Dodge is pleased with its seven years of cooperation in Blackwell and with state authorities, and our company believes the people of Blackwell deserve better than fear tactics. At a time to be announced, Phelps Dodge will publicly correct the law firm's distortions."

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