

TESTING SHOWS HIGH LEVELS OF ARSENIC IN TOXIC HILL COLLAPSE NEAR PITTSBURGH, EPA AND PA AGENCY URGED BY CITIZENS TO INTERVENE ON EMERGENCY BASIS

Overrun Homeowners Show Ill Health Indications, Others Homes in Danger of Wider Collapse; Concerns Grow About Lack of Action on Possible Danger to Pittsburgh Area Drinking Water.

FORWARD TOWNSHIP, PA.///February 2, 2005///Armed with laboratory test results showing levels of the carcinogen arsenic at least 10 times normal levels, citizens in Forward Township, which is located about 20 miles outside Pittsburgh, joined today with concerned groups to call on the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) to intervene on an emergency basis to address the collapse last week of a massive fly ash hill.

The EPA and state have so far taken no direct action to stabilize the Forward Township hill collapse, which has the potential to worsen and damage more than the nine currently affected homes. Last Tuesday and Wednesday, thousands of tons from a fly ash hill overlooking a section of Forward Township tumbled down, sweeping through the neighborhood and then into the Perry Mills Run, which feeds directly into Monongahela River. In addition to ignoring the plight of the homeowners and others endangered by the arsenic levels and a possible further collapse of the toxic hillside, DEP and EPA officials have not assessed or taken other steps to mitigate the potential threat posed to residents of Pittsburgh and dozens of other area communities that draw their drinking water from the river.

GLA Laboratories, King of Prussia, PA tested a sample of the fly ash spilled on Rostosky Ridge Road in Forward Township from an the adjacent hillside reveals elevated levels of arsenic. Test results also revealed the presence of lead, cadmium, mercury and other contaminants. Arsenic was detected at 170 parts per million, or more than 10 times the naturally occurring background level. Chronic exposure to arsenic is a known to cause cancer in humans. Acute exposures are linked to other health effects such as upper respiratory distress, gastrointestinal distress, heart and blood vessel damage, fever, and nerve injury.

Concerned parties indicated that more testing will be needed to assess the level of risk to the residents of Forward Township. However, given arsenic's potency, Superfund cleanup under federal and state law generally requires soil contaminated with arsenic to be cleaned up at least to background levels.

The high levels of arsenic in the sample are only part of the concern. Because the site has not been stabilized or contained, the fly ash continues to flow into a creek that leads to the Monongahela River. Residents report that, in some portions, the creek is nearly five feet deep in fly ash, and that the neighborhood is threatened by an additional landslide from fly ash remaining on the nearby hillside. Meanwhile, lacking any guidance from the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection, the township has apparently removed a considerable quantity of the flyash and deposited it on a nearby playground. Arsenic is particularly dangerous to young children, so the material on the playground must pose a particular concern.

On behalf of the affected citizens of Forward Township, Clean Water Action and the Environmental Integrity Project are asking the USEPA and Pennsylvania's Department of Environmental Protection to: take immediate steps to stabilize the site, and stop the flow of fly ash toward residential properties or the Monongahela River; report on the results of any samples that may have taken to date of the fly ash, and of the discharge of ash-laden wastewater into the creek and river, and take additional samples as required; use the authorities both the federal and state agencies have been given to conduct an emergency removal of the contaminated soil; and meet with the residents within 24 hours to advise them on what steps should be taken to protect their health and the safety of their property.

Barbara and Stewart Diess, who are Forward Township homeowners whose property was literally overrun by the toxic hill collapse, said: "Having our property overrun by the collapse of this hillside was bad enough. But now that we are being told of possible short- and long-term health problems related to arsenic and other possible toxins, we want to see the state and EPA get off the stick and do something about this. We are talking about damage to people's homes and exposure to women of child-bearing years, our children and our grandchildren. It also is a terrifying prospect to know that nothing is being done to prevent an even bigger problem if more of the hill collapses and comes sweeping down onto us and our homes. We need help now!"

Aaron Barchowsky, Ph.D., associate professor and director of the Center for the Environmental Basis of Human Disease at the Department of Environmental and Occupational Health at the Graduate School of Public Health of the University of Pittsburgh, said: "Breathing or swallowing dust contaminated high levels of arsenic poses a great risk of acute injury to the respiratory system, heart, gastrointestinal track, and nervous system. Symptoms might include soar throats, upper respiratory problems, flushing of the face, nausea and vomiting, irregular heart beats, and tingling in the fingers and feet. These symptoms can develop over weeks after exposure and are generally reversible if exposure is stopped. There are tests to determine the level of exposure and these should be conducted in this case. These tests can determine if you have been exposed to above-average levels of arsenic. They cannot predict how the arsenic levels in your body will affect your health."

Myron Arnowitt, Western PA director, Clean Water Action, said: "Our first concern is about these families. But we also want to know what the potentially wider impacts are here from all of the fly ash slide that has been sluiced into a feeder for a major river that is drawn upon for drinking water by Pittsburgh and dozens of other communities in this region. We need the Pennsylvania Department of Environmental Protection to protect our waterways, and make sure that our drinking water is protected from heavy metal contamination. Keeping fly ash out of our rivers is just common sense."

Eric Schaeffer, director, Environmental Integrity Project, said: "The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has stepped in to stabilize and clean-up other situations like this and it should happen here. I am concerned that EPA is simply deferring in this situation to its sister agency in Pennsylvania, which appears even more reluctant to take the steps needed here."

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Related photos, lab results, and a streaming audio recording of the today's news event will be available on the Web as of 6 p.m. EDT on February 2, 2005 at <http://www.environmentalintegrity.org>.