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Oregon Public Health finds indoor air of Trainsong neighborhood homes not affected by vapors from contaminated groundwater

New state report issued today after year-long study of homes

Oregon Public Health officials have determined that the indoor air quality of homes in the Northwest Eugene Trainsong neighborhood is not affected by vapors released through nearby contaminated groundwater, according to a report released today.

State officials began studying the potential for indoor air contamination in 2006. Union Pacific Railroad operations that began more than 100 years ago contaminated the groundwater with volatile organic chemicals. Officials from Oregon Public Health and the Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) were concerned that these chemicals might be moving into the indoor air of homes located near the rail yard.

“We know that residents in this area have many concerns about pollution from the rail yard. This report looked specifically at whether the chemicals in the groundwater are affecting indoor air quality,” said Sujata Joshi, epidemiologist for the Oregon Public Health Environmental Health Assessment Program.

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Investigators measured and compared the chemical vapor levels in soil, crawlspaces, and outdoor and indoor air at nine Trainsong homes during the course of a year. The results indicated that these chemicals are not entering the indoor air of these Trainsong homes.

Seven of the nine study homes had levels of certain volatile chemicals that were below levels of health concern. However, two of the homes had indoor air levels that were above health guidelines. The investigators concluded the indoor air of these two homes is not affected by the contaminated groundwater, but instead by chemicals within the homes themselves.

“We are committed to working with these two homeowners to help them identify and remove the sources that are contaminating the air inside their homes. There are many commonly used household products that can contaminate the indoor air quality of people’s homes,” Joshi said.

The groundwater near the rail yard is contaminated with the chemicals trichloroethylene and tetrachloroethylene, also known as TCE and PCE. These chemicals can cause damage to the central nervous system, immune system, kidneys and liver, as well as cause an increased risk for certain types of cancer.

The chemical vapor levels in the soil beneath the Trainsong neighborhood have dropped dramatically in the past two years. However, until DEQ can verify that the levels will stay low, Union Pacific Railroad will maintain barriers against the vapors in the study homes as an added measure of safety.

With DEQ oversight, the railroad will also continue monitoring soil gas levels in the Trainsong neighborhood and will use this information to determine how long the vapor barriers will need to be maintained.

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Even though the homes near the rail yard are not affected by the contamination, Oregon Public Health officials continue to recommend that residents in the area use caution when using irrigation wells. Residents with contaminated wells should limit their use of those wells to outdoor purposes only and not drink or use the water for cooking, cleaning or other in-home uses.

To link to the full report:

www.healthoregon.org/ehap

For information about clean-up in the Trainsong area:

Contact Don Hanson, 541-687-7349 or hanson.don@deq.state.or.us.

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