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EPA Targets Metro East Toxic-Waste Sites

'We're Going To Do This Sooner And Better' Than Before, Federal Official Vows

By Margaret Gillerman
Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

The federal government has targeted East St. Louis and other Metro East communities along the Mississippi River for high-level and high-priority help in cleaning up toxic-waste sites and a host of other environmental messes.

"We want to deal with all the environmental issues in this area as a high-priority matter," said David Ullrich, a federal EPA official. He was in East St. Louis on Tuesday for a meeting to plot strategy and hear from residents.

"We're going to do this sooner and better and more efficiently" than in the past, he said.

The new effort — called the Mississippi River Gateway Initiative — involves a coalition of more than a dozen federal and state agencies. Over the last few months, U.S. EPA staff members from Washington and Chicago have been talking to Metro East residents about what environmental troubles worry them most.

Ullrich described the target area, which stretches from Alton to Cahokia, as "an area where we feel there's a great need" for extra assistance. It is an area that is riddled with

waste from failed factories and by unchecked development in the flood plains.

The problems the group hopes to remedy include major toxic-waste sites, environmental woes caused by lead-based paint, crumbling sewer systems, open burning by refineries, infestations by rodents and stinking, illegally dumped garbage.

This is "an effort to focus all our collective resources on the area," said Ullrich, who is deputy director of EPA's Region 5, based in Chicago.

The program also may address some environmental problems in St. Louis and St. Louis County, looking especially at lead poisoning there, officials said.

On Tuesday, Ullrich led a meeting of about 20 senior managers of federal and state agencies at State Community College in East St. Louis. They represented more than a dozen offices including the Illinois and Missouri health departments, the federal Housing and Urban Development and the Illinois attorney general.

The initiative comes amid a growing cry in the country of "environmental racism," which refers to allegations of neglect by federal agencies in cleaning up neighborhoods of poor, black and Hispanic people in favor of wealthier, white suburban communities.

At Tuesday's meeting, the Rev. Buck Jones, a community activist, asked the officials why East St. Louis, a virtually all-black community, had 22 sites identified as possible hazardous sites and yet none was on the

National Priority List for cleanup. Jones is executive director of Project HOPE (Helping Other People Emerge).

Jones said that residents in one East St. Louis neighborhood near a neglected toxic-waste site had an alarming cancer rate.

"You asked us to talk about environmental injustice," said Kathy Andria, an environmental activist from Granite City, who said she lived between two toxic-dump sites. In Granite City, "the air is polluted, the ground water is contaminated, the city government is hungry for any industry," she said.

While she was growing up, she said, "The local steel mills regularly dumped anything and everything into our yards. . . . We were white, but we were poor."

Venessa Marion, administrator of the Operation New Spirit Neighborhood Office in East St. Louis, talked about environmental issues beyond the typical scope of the EPA: abandoned housing.

"There's one cry that echoes consistently: Clean up," Marion said.

Louis Tiemann, a retired banker in Belleville and president of the East St. Louis Community Fund, said East St. Louis needed jobs more than anything.

"The jobs are not going to be there until this city gets cleaned up," Tiemann said.

The Gateway Initiative group plans to develop a plan of action based on residents' concerns.

East St. Louis Mayor Gordon Bush was optimistic.

"I'm very encouraged" by the high-level officials at the meeting, he said. "These are people who can make things happen."

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