

Friday, March 24, 1972

El Paso Mayor Seeks Federal Aid in Area Hit by Lead Poisoning

Neighborhood of Asarco Plant
Has 85 Lead-Sick Children;
Disaster Designation Urged

Special to THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

EL PASO — This city's "Smeltertown," an area of some 120 families in the shadow of an American Smelting & Refining Co. facility, may become one of the nation's first "lead poison disaster areas."

That's the federal-aid label Mayor Bert Williams is seeking as 35 children are being treated for lead poisoning and apprehension mounts that the dimensions of the problem may be much larger.

The big question in the episode—"Where did the lead come from?"—is the main issue of a pollution suit being heard in an El Paso district court. Texas and El Paso brought suit against Asarco charging it with failure to comply with pollution ordinances. They are asking for compliance and payment by Asarco of punitive penalties estimated at about \$1 million. Testimony in the fourth week of the trial continues to focus on whether local lead poisoning cases are the result of inhalation of lead particles in the air.

The company refuses to discuss the case, but its attorneys have pounded away in the courtroom with the argument that the children would have been poisoned by eating paint chips or soil containing lead.

While Mayor Williams is in Washington urging federal aid for his jittery city, developments back home are multiplying.

The city-county health unit here is proposing blood sampling of as many as 50,000 children under six years old to determine lead concentrations. The mayor of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, which is contiguous with El Paso's southern city limit, advised El Paso officials of plans for a similar blood-sampling project in his city. In addition New Mexico, which borders El Paso in the vicinity of the smelter, plans to send a public health team to El Paso next week to determine if atmospheric lead concentrations are affecting the New Mexico lower Rio Grande Valley. And the U.S. Public Health Service announced it intends to send a team to El Paso next week to begin sampling the lead in El Paso's atmosphere.

Evidence of lead poisoning among children living in the area near the smelter came to light Feb. 19, just before the opening of the trial involving Asarco. It was disclosed that blood samples of 125 children and adults had turned up five cases of lead poisoning. Subsequently, attorneys for the city and state have dwelled on the smelter's release of 285 tons of lead particles emitted each year from its smoke stacks. Some testimony has also supported the contention that local lead poisoning cases have been produced by inhalation of lead.

Whatever the outcome of the lawsuit, odds are that Smeltertown, currently the source of heated litigation and emotional strife, will soon be a ghost. Relocation housing has been provided for three of the families involved so the ailing children won't have to return to potentially hazardous conditions. And speculation is

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