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Creek Contamination Level To Be Tested

By Jerri Stroud
Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

The Illinois Environmental Protection Agency will begin tests this week to determine the extent of contamination of soil and ground water in the area surrounding "Dead Creek" in Cahokia and Sanger.

Tests of soil samples taken last week confirmed earlier results showing high levels of contamination of the creek with polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs), phosphorus and a variety of heavy metals, agency officials announced Wednesday at a news conference in Cahokia.

But only the immediate area of the creek and three nearby wells were tested. The agency must determine how much of the surrounding area has been contaminated to determine what long-term environmental effects the contamination may have. No cleanup can begin until that is completed and until a source of funds can be found to pay for the cleanup.

Over the next few months, the agency will test areas on both sides of Dead Creek, the creek bed in the industrial area to the north of the creek and in the residential area to the south. Crops will be sampled, and core samples will be taken to determine whether ground water has been contaminated.

State EPA officials emphasized there is no immediate danger to public health from the

contamination. The agency has issued an order barring anyone from going into the creek area, and a snow fence has been erected around it.

The contamination was discovered in late August when state officials learned that the death of a dog belonging to a Cahokia resident apparently had been caused by chemical burns from rolling in the creek.

James Kelly, a chemist for the Illinois EPA, said the dog probably was exposed to the high phosphorus content at the south end of the creek.

The PCBs are the most toxic substances in the creek, Kelly said. But a person would have to ingest the soil, rub it on the skin or breathe vapors from near the soil surface for a long period for it to have any effects. PCBs are known to affect the skin, liver and eyes, and they are suspected of causing cancer.

Kelly said the creek only emits vapors when the surface is disturbed, but residents disputed that. The agency says vapors present no danger at present.

Kelly said tests indicated higher concentrations of PCBs at the north end of the ditch and higher concentrations of phosphorus and heavy metals at the south end.

Three samples taken south of Quassy Avenue showed PCB levels ranging from 1,000 parts per

million to 17,000 parts per million. The EPA considers a level of 500 parts per million to be dangerous.

Just north of Judith Lane, concentrations of phosphorus and heavy metals were high, but PCB levels were much lower, only 120 parts per million. The tests showed phosphorus concentrations as high as 120,000 parts per million, or 12 percent, copper levels at 20,000 parts per million, zinc at 25,000 parts per million, barium at 4,000 parts per million, nickel at 3,500 parts per million and lead at 2,000 parts per million.

The tests showed contaminants south of the blocked culvert at Judith, and some PCBs were found in one of three private wells nearby that were tested. A pond adjacent to the creek had normal levels of heavy metals, but did contain PCBs and some hydrocarbons.

The contaminated well is just east of the pond. In addition to the PCBs, the well contained low levels of chlordane and alkybenzenes, compounds related to pesticides. Kelly, said the pesticides apparently came from another source, but the PCBs could have migrated from the creek or pond.

Authorities are still trying to determine who is responsible for the chemicals dumped into the creek.

Authorities are also looking into reports that there was an illegal dump site east of the creek, about 200 yards south of the Sanger Village Mall.

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