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ENVIRONMENT

What's next for homes contaminated by the J.H. Baxter wood treatment plant in West Eugene



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Neighbors and agencies tasked with cleaning up yards, gardens and soil contaminated with dioxins from the J.H. Baxter & Co. plant in West Eugene are still waiting for work to get underway more than a year after the wood treatment plant closed.

J.H. Baxter "mothballed" its facility on Roosevelt Drive on Jan. 31, 2022. The plant had operated since 1940 and had a history of environmental violations. Department of Environmental Quality oversaw testing in nearby soil in 2020 discovering a class of toxic compounds called dioxins in some.

DEQ formed a cleanup plan for seven contaminated yards around the former plant. The agency said it plans to pay for the upfront costs with expectations J.H. Baxter will later pay back the costs.

DEQ and the Environmental Protection Agency have indicated the next steps for additional testing and then cleanup, but neighbors say they remain worried and hope for progress toward a safe environment.

EPA recently tested more than two dozen other yards and is currently awaiting results to determine if more soil in the area was contaminated.

"There are people who have lived in that neighborhood for decades," said Lisa Arkin, executive director of Beyond Toxics. "We have done door-to-door canvassing in that neighborhood and we meet people that have lived in their homes 30 years or more and have raised their children there, and they have been gardening, touching the soil, walking in the house with their shoes on, letting their pets go in and out all these decades."

Related: 7 takeaways from new report on contamination near J.H. Baxter plant

Years of contamination to a vulnerable neighborhood

The 31-acre J.H. Baxter facility site is located off Roosevelt Boulevard inside the Bethel community, with homes immediately to the north and northwest of the facility.

U.S. Census data indicates the Bethel community has a higher percentage of low-income and minority residents compared to the rest of Lane County and the state. About 25.7% of people in this community live below the poverty line, and about 11% were born outside of the U.S.

The Bethel neighborhood is part of an industrial corridor made up of 35 of the 36 manufacturing companies within Eugene's city limits. It is bisected by Highway 69, bordered by Highway 99 and Highway 126. An estimated 696,526 pounds of toxic chemicals were emitted in West Eugene in 2020 alone, according to the city of Eugene Toxics Reporting Program.

For years, neighbors complained about smells from the facility and voiced concerns about possible health implications. The first recorded complaint from neighbors was in 1977. In 2004, complaints peaked with 762 air quality complaints from neighbors.

OHA's latest investigation into the facility

A recent investigation into the Baxter facility by the Oregon Health Authority and the Environmental Health Assessment Program determined some homes near the former J.H. Baxter facility have dioxin levels high enough to potentially harm children who were exposed to the soil and could contaminate eggs from chickens raised on it.

The multi-year investigation indicated seven homes near Baxter had soil with dioxin concentrations over 40 parts per trillion. Soil with that concentration could harm the health of children under 6 who regularly came into contact with bare soil for a year or longer.

No children under 6 lived in any of the seven houses with dioxin concentrations over 40 parts per trillion, the report said, but neighbors still worry.

Emily Hoffman and Kyle Meyer live in one of the homes with the highest levels of dioxin found in the soil. Both expressed worries about the potential dangers of the soil. While they don't have kids, Hoffman said she has animals and is concerned about how the soil might affect them.

"Finding out our soil is full of chemicals is concerning," Hoffman said. "We're hoping for some progress."

For homes with high dioxin levels, OHA recommended in its report for people to remove shoes and wipe their feet before entering the house. It also recommended washing hands with soap and water after gardening and to avoid activities that disturb large amounts of soil, like digging holes or leaving piles of soil exposed.

According to OHA's report, people from the community have commonly expressed concerns related to the smells from the facility, worsening of health conditions because of the odor, difficulty breathing, asthma rates in children and increased rates of lung cancer and Hodgkin's Lymphoma.

In 2008, EHAP investigated cancer rates in the Bethel community, but it couldn't determine whether environmental contaminants (such as those from the Baxter facility) were related to cancer cases in the area. Arkin said she'd like to see updated cancer studies.

OHA is seeking public comment on the report through early June. The agency will also hold a meeting in Eugene at Petersen Barn Community Center on April 22 at a time to be determined. Comments ahead of the meeting can be emailed to ehap.info@oha.oregon.gov or mailed to: Oregon Health Authority – EHAP, 800 Oregon St., Suite 640, Portland, OR., 97232. For more info, go to: bit.ly/3LrPjod.

Next steps from DEQ

DEQ had been leading the initial testing and is working to start the cleanup of the seven yards with high dioxin levels. It plans to remove the contaminated soil and replace it with clean, tested soil. This process is expected to take place this summer or early fall, Dylan Darling, DEQ spokesperson, said.

Hoffman and Meyer said their yard will need to have 3 feet of soil removed, as high dioxin levels were found that deep in the ground. With that much soil being removed, the two said they are worried about how their more mature plants will hold up.

This concern was echoed by Arkin, who said removing that much soil could cause a lot of disruption to mature vegetation in the neighborhood.

"What will that do to the neighborhood in terms of the cooling factor of trees, the ability of trees to absorb pollution from the air, the ability of trees to provide us comfort, all the animals that depend on trees?" Arkin said.

Darling said DEQ will work with each property owner to restore the yards to how they were before the contaminated soil is removed.

EPA's three-pronged cleanup approach

The EPA said it is tackling its involvement in cleanup with a three-pronged approach, EPA spokesperson Bill Dunbar said. One of those approaches is helping DEQ with additional yard sampling. In March, EPA collected samples from 28 additional yards in the area to determine how far contamination from the facility is found and whether more yards need to be cleaned up.

Along with sampling more yards, EPA is taking on the cleanup of the J.H. Baxter facility itself. It has to determine things like what the facility itself looks like, what's there, what risks its contents pose and how can those get removed and disposed of safely, Dunbar said. The agency is in the beginning stages of cleanup, so it is still early to tell how long the process will take, Dunbar said.

The third part of its approach to the cleanup is determining what happened around the facility. EPA will look at how the facility has impacted other aspects of the environment like nearby soils, groundwater and any nearby bodies of water, Dunbar said.

Beyond Toxic's Bethel Clean Energy Project

Local nonprofit Beyond Toxics has been one of J.H. Baxter's most vocal opponents in prompting investigations into the facility's contamination. The group is part of the J.H. Baxter Core Team, a forum for discussions with neighbors, community members and environmental agencies. The team has been meeting monthly for more than two years to discuss Baxter's contamination and cleanup plans, Arkin said.

As for a successful cleanup, Arkin said people are still learning what that looks like. It's unusual to have a cleanup of a residential neighborhood, as cleanups are usually mainly focused on the site of the polluter, she said.

"We're talking about the value of people's properties. We're talking about a stigma on the neighborhood. People being able to sell their home," Arkin said. "So what does the complete cleanup look like in a residential neighborhood? I think we're all learning about it as we go along this process."

The group's most recent effort is the Bethel Clean Energy Project. Arkin said they are currently canvassing the small section of the Bethel neighborhood and talking to people about ways to access clean energy technology for their homes.

"They've had so much bad news over the years," she said. "And we want to do something that's positive for them that will improve the value of their house and will save them money on air, heating and cooling."

The group plans to find out what clean energy residents would like to have access to and then work with them to get state and federal funding used to subsidize clean energy for burdened communities. The initial pilot project focuses on the small section of Bethel affected by Baxter's contamination, but she hopes to expand into other neighborhoods.

Going forward, Arkin said she hopes agencies and communities learn from the long battle with the Baxter facility.

"I think that's a lesson there that agencies need to work with community-based organizations and the community to really get a handle on what is going on on the ground for the people who live there."

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