



TEXAS NATURAL RESOURCE CONSERVATION COMMISSION

NEWS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
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MISSION RESULTS: SOME PESTICIDE/METALS CONTAMINATION *TNRCC will remove soil, monitor area*

The Texas Natural Resource Conservation Commission (TNRCC) today announced the results of soil sampling done in two neighborhoods near the site of a former pesticide mixing plant and storage warehouse in Mission. With the exception of a few sites, the levels of contamination are considered minimal and pose no immediate health threat to residents. Of the 48 properties tested, 17 sites indicated various levels of pesticides or metals contamination. However, as a precaution, TNRCC officials recommend soil removal on all properties that indicate **any** level of contamination above the agency's health-based standards.

In early April, TNRCC officials began soil sampling on 42 residential, three schools, two Mission CISD properties, and one vacant property. Samples were tested at a Houston laboratory for the presence of pesticides or metals. The neighborhoods tested were in the vicinity of a former pesticide mixing plant which had been previously cleaned up by the Environmental Protection Agency and a state Superfund site cleaned up by the TNRCC in 1999. Test results indicate various amounts of toxaphene, dieldrin, beta-BCH, heptachlor epoxide, chlordane, 4,4 -DDT, and 4,4 DDE—all known constituents in pesticides. The metals found in the soil samples include lead and cadmium.

No pesticides or metals were found at levels of health concern at the three Mission elementary school properties that were also tested. All schools are considered safe from contamination. The school district's maintenance facility, located adjacent to the mixing plant, did contain elevated levels of several pesticides.

TNRCC officials are recommending soil removal and other clean up activities on a total of 17 properties. The agency will be responsible for all clean up work at no cost to the community. Further testing is also being considered for other neighborhood properties that were not tested.

All individual property owners are being notified of the test results and will be contacted for permission to begin remediation. The agency is also offering suggestions on ways residents can minimize exposures to soil contaminants until this removal can occur.

For more information, please contact the TNRCC at 1/800-633-9363.

All TNRCC News Releases are available at www.tnrcc.state.tx.us.

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In a time well before Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring," a book that scrutinized the use of DDT, little was known about pesticides' effects on humans. South Mission residents, many of them illiterate, Spanish-speaking immigrants from Mexico, eagerly embraced opportunities to blend chemicals in a region with few jobs.

Around 1960, residents at a third site were happy to receive some dirt that, not knowing of its contamination, they later used to blanket a bullring.

"The Rio Grande Valley at that time was not that populated," said Ramon Garcia, an Edinburg lawyer well known for winning large jury verdicts, who is representing plaintiffs. "There were a lot of vacant areas where companies could have located.

"But for whatever reason, they located in the heart of Mission, which was predominantly Mexican American."

Hayes-Sammons sputtered to a halt around the time DDT was banned in 1972. But members of South Mission's older generation, like Barrera, remember growing up on Miller Street, only blocks from the warehouse.

He and his friends climbed on the barrels of pesticides; when it rained, they would splash about in the "rainbow water" that cascaded down from the warehouse site and pooled in the dirt streets.

"You could smell it all the time," Barrera said. "It wasn't an offensive odor. It was kind of sweet."

About the same time, Minerva Ramirez's older sister was making her eat mud pies. Their family lived next to the mixing plant on Holland Avenue.

"I was always a sickly kid," said Ramirez, 47. "I was out of school for a year and a half. I was always fainting and had trouble breathing.

"I started bleeding from my eyes my sophomore year in college. My doctor said, 'You must be a saint. Only the saints cry blood.'"

Ramirez was a twin whose sibling was born dead. Two of her brothers died young, and another brother suffered from frequent vomiting. Ramirez had reproductive problems: She rarely menstruated and suffered three miscarriages.

A cousin who lived nearby also had an unusual story. She was rushed to a hospital one day where a doctor told her that her husband was trying to poison her: She had high levels of arsenic in her blood.

That cousin also gave birth to a child with six nipples.

Ramirez said her 16-year-old son had a tumor the size of a baseball removed from his knee, and recently underwent surgery for the sudden retraction of a testicle.

"The doctor said this is something very odd, something unexplainable that he couldn't believe," she said.

She's scared that her 3-year-old daughter, whom she nursed, will suffer from similar horrors. The little girl already has inexplicable fevers and vomiting.

The stories of the sick and dying go on, but so far only anecdotal evidence is available to support Mission residents' contention that business activities here harmed their health.