

Neighbors learn more about groundwater contamination

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CHEYENNE -- Several concerned residents who live southwest of the Capitol went to the Herschler Building on Wednesday night to learn more about the groundwater and soil contamination beneath their homes.

The essence of the message from the Wyoming Department of Environmental Quality was this: The soil vapors from the perchloroethylene that could creep into your home are probably not strong enough to significantly increase your cancer risk, experts said.

Yet some are eligible to get a ventilation system installed in their basements to cart away the fumes that could otherwise seep into their homes.

This fall, DEQ had found a plume of perchloroethylene, a dry cleaning chemical, in the groundwater, affecting nearly 70 homes and businesses lying south of Randall, east of O'Neil, north of West 22nd and west of Pioneer.

Maps show that the highest concentrations are on the north side.

Half of the 14 test wells had PCE levels that were above drinking water standards. And half the 43 soil samples showed vapor levels above the minimum standards.

The contamination was first discovered in the 2500 block of Thomes in 2003, when Safeway was testing the soil after buying the properties to make way for a new grocery store.

The DEQ then got \$2 million to further investigate and mitigate this and three other high-priority sites around the state.

Recently, Safeway sold the store and vacant houses to the state.

Cleanup is a long-term goal, said Bonnie Pierce, who is managing the project at the DEQ, and more funding would probably be needed for that.

Other homes near the plume are eligible for free indoor air testing. Those that test at or below 8.1 micrograms per cubic meter will be considered at an acceptable risk and won't get state-funded ventilation.

At that level, the risk of cancer goes up 0.0001 percent, or one in 100,000 persons. That's assuming you've "spent your life exposed to that level" said Stephen Foster, a toxicologist who was on hand to answer questions.

He also pointed out 677,000 micrograms per cubic meter was the lowest level in lab tests to cause cancer in mice.

Since humans can't be directly tested, they have to rely on epidemiology studies to estimate what the cancer risk might be, he said.

What people don't consider, Foster said, is that people have a higher risk of cancer from radon exposure -- a radioactive gas that comes up from the ground and can make its way into homes. That poses a 0.02 percent risk.

The overall cancer risk to a Wyomingite is 45 percent.

Kathy Joannides came to the meeting to learn more about the risk the contamination posed to the Saints Constantine & Helen Greek Orthodox church at 501 W. 27th St. Tests near the church showed the soil vapors were slightly higher than the standard.

"We were just concerned about the health and safety of the parishioners and we wanted to get on top of it as fast as we could," Joannides said, who is parish council president.

Jim Platt, who lives on 27th and Bent, asked many questions about cleanup and the risks to children. Afterwards, he said the health risks of exposure were not clear to him.

And he came up with another question that didn't get asked during the public session: "Is it safe to eat from your garden?"

