

Ford to clean up arsenic contamination after 4-year fight

October 20 2009, By Barbara Williams

Ford Motor Co. will haul out piles of arsenic-laced soil found in Ringwood State Park in New Jersey, ending a nearly-four-year battle over the source of the waste.

The company failed to prove the cancer-causing element was a naturally occurring remnant of mining in the remote mountain in Ringwood, rather than a [byproduct](#) of the paint sludge it dumped decades ago. As a result, the federal [Environmental Protection Agency](#) is demanding that Ford remove the contamination as part of its Superfund cleanup.

Plastic tarps now cover several hockey-rink-size swaths of the tainted soil. Federal officials say the arsenic isn't leaching and has not affected the nearby Wanaque Reservoir, which serves more than 2 million state residents.

Since the discovery of the arsenic in January 2006, Ford has denied it came from liquid paint sludge dumped 40 years ago in the Upper Ringwood, N.J., neighborhood and what is now state parkland nearby. Instead, the company said, it was from tailings, the remnants of iron ore mining done nearly a century ago.

Extensive testing by Ford didn't support its hypothesis, however, so EPA Project Manager Joseph Gowers said the company likely will remove the soil by next month, at a cost of about \$1 million.

"Ford didn't conclusively prove that sludge did not cause the arsenic,"

Gowers said Monday. "So they will be taking it out. They want to get it done before the dead of winter, probably by the middle of November."

Gowers said the EPA and Ford are still working out details of the work plan. Once that is done, removal will begin immediately.

Ford spokesman Jon Holt said the company had no comment.

Vivian Milligan, a community leader who lives just up a small hill from the plastic-covered soil, is taking a wait-and-see attitude.

"We've been waiting so long for them to get this out of here," Milligan said. "Let's see what actually happens and if it is all taken out."

The auto giant is in the midst of a second Superfund cleanup of the 500-plus acres it used as a dump site, with the EPA again overseeing the efforts. The contamination -- sludge, solvents and other industrial waste -- was so expansive that it is the only site in the country to be put back on the nation's Superfund list after a failed initial cleanup.

The section of the park where the contamination was discovered was closed in 2004, when Ford started its latest cleanup.

Residents of the Upper Ringwood community, many of whom belong to the state-recognized Rampough Mountain Indian tribe, suffer a number of illnesses and blame them on the contamination. No link has been proven between the sicknesses and the waste; residents recently settled a lawsuit with Ford and several other companies for \$10 million and are fine-tuning an agreement with Ringwood over the dumping. The suits are not related to the cleanup.

Ford will not say how much money has been spent on the cleanup and the government does not require financial statements, but Gowers said

that about two years ago, contractors were reporting \$20 million to \$25 million already spent. At that time, 24,000 tons of waste had been trucked off the site. To date, 35,000 tons has been removed.

Rich Chapin, an engineer hired on behalf of the residents by the environmental group Edison Wetlands Association, said Monday "Ford did every extensive, very sophisticated (soil) tests that had to be half a million dollars. What they found is that once arsenic gets into the tailings, it stays there. Not so with the sludge."

Chapin concluded that because arsenic leaches out of paint sludge, the soil contamination must have come from the industrial waste and so Ford is responsible for removing it.

The soil had arsenic levels at twice the state safety level, 20 parts per million. But tests on sludge done by The Record for its 2005 "Toxic Legacy" series -- which chronicled Ford's dumping, cleanup efforts and the toll on the community -- showed arsenic levels much higher: at 145 parts per million and 171 ppm.

"It's great news that this stuff is finally being removed," said Robert Spiegel, EWA director. "This is a significant victory for the community, and they haven't had one in a while."

Exactly how much of the arsenic-laced soil will be trucked out of state cannot be determined until excavation work reveals how deep and widespread the arsenic is, Gowers said. So far, it is in three separate areas, all located at the end of Peters Mine Road.

Where it will be taken also was unclear. The most toxic waste from the rest of the area was trucked to Michigan, the remainder to Pennsylvania.

"Where it is going is one of the questions Ford needs to answer in the

work plan," Gowers said.

TIMELINE:

- 1967-71: [Ford Motor](#) Co. contractors dump tens of thousands of tons of toxic paint sludge into a former mining area of Ringwood that also is home to nearly 500 people, many from the Ramapough Mountain Indian tribe.
- 1983: Area put on federal Superfund list of hazardous sites. Ford to complete a cleanup under oversight of U.S. Environmental Protection Agency.
- 1994: EPA declares the area clean and takes it off Superfund list after Ford removes more than 7,000 cubic yards of sludge and tainted soil.
- 2004 : Residents complain of serious illnesses and show government officials mounds of remaining waste on their properties and in nearby lands, including Ringwood State Park.
- 2006: Residents sue Ford, Ringwood and several companies. EPA returns the site to Superfund list. Paint sludge is found in a deep mine pit, but Ford and government representatives say it hasn't affected the nearby Wanaque Reservoir.
- 2008: Ford contractors finish digging at the dump, but other pollution remains in a state park and in the neighborhood. EPA signs off on the contractors' withdrawal after removal of 35,000 more tons of waste. Ford says it's not responsible for some remaining surface debris.
- 2009: In April, attorneys for residents reach a tentative lawsuit settlement with Ford and other companies. The settlement is finalized in

September. Terms are not publicly disclosed, but sources close to the case put the settlement at \$10 million.

- 2009: The EPA announces in mid-October that Ford will remove arsenic-laced soil found dumped in what is now Ringwood State Park and is aiming to have the cleanup completed in November.

HISTORY:

It is one of the more famous poisons in history, known as a clandestine murder weapon from the Middle Ages onward.

But arsenic also has been a serious environmental problem because of its high toxicity. Chronic exposure can cause cancer, especially in the liver, bladder and lungs.

Arsenic, which occurs naturally in soil and minerals, has ruined underground water supplies across the world. It can seep into lakes, rivers or wells by dissolving in rain or snow or through the discharge of industrial waste. It is especially deadly because it has no odor or strong taste.

Most poisoning comes from ingesting arsenic rather than skin contact or breathing arsenic-laced dust, according to the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry. Arsenic above 60,000 parts per billion in water can result in death. Even a fraction of that amount will irritate the stomach and intestines, causing nausea, vomiting and diarrhea.

It can decrease production of red and white blood cells, which may cause fatigue, abnormal heart rhythm, blood-vessel damage and a "pins and needles" sensation in the hands and feet. Long-term exposure cause patches of dark skin along with small dark marks on the palms, soles and

torso, according to the ATSDR.

One of the worst [arsenic](#) poisoning cases in recent years has occurred in Bangladesh, where millions have been poisoned from thousands of contaminated wells.

By Scott Fallon

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