

32 years after poisoning, cleanup launched at arsenic site

August 6 2019, by Mary Esch



In this Wednesday, June 12, 2019, photo, a sign is displayed at the entrance to an old arsenic mine in Carmel, N.Y. The Environmental Protection Agency is proposing a Superfund cleanup of a neighborhood in New York contaminated with arsenic from the 19th-century mine. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig)

In the weeks after they moved from New York City to their dream home

in the leafy countryside, Norman and Alicia Berns grew ill with nausea, numbness and crushing fatigue.

She tried to restore her health by drinking plenty of water, but that turned out to be the worst thing she could do.

"We were just getting progressively sicker, and the doctors couldn't figure out why," said Norman Berns.

Tests eventually revealed the Bernses had arsenic poisoning. They were hospitalized and endured weeks of therapy to purge the toxic metal from their bodies. County and state health investigators found arsenic had leached into their well from a long-abandoned mountainside mine, and the Environmental Protection Agency installed a tank for trucked-in water at their home.

That was in 1987. This spring, the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry warned that arsenic in the soil surrounding 10 homes in the neighborhood where the Bernses once lived poses a "significant threat to [human health](#)."

Hazmat-suited crews from the EPA blanketed yards with wood chips and gravel to prevent contact with the toxic soil. The state posted warning signs for hikers and mountain bikers in adjacent parkland.



In this Wednesday, June 12, 2019, photo, Eric Luther walks through his yard, which was covered in wood chips by the Environmental Protection Agency, in Carmel, N.Y. The EPA is proposing a Superfund cleanup of the neighborhood, which is contaminated with arsenic from a 19th-century mine. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig)

Some residents are surprised to see such urgent action three decades after the Bernses were sickened.

"They're doing now what should have been done 32 years ago," said Eric Luther, who lives with his husband in a modest ranch house in woods near the Bernses' former home. "We're glad it's being fast-tracked now, but it's scary. We went from living normal, happy lives to having the federal government telling us we're in a toxic environment."

The EPA has proposed adding the arsenic mine site to the Superfund National Priorities List, which includes more than 1,300 sites in urgent need of cleanup. In July, the site was added to the EPA's Emphasis List of 17 Superfund sites targeted for "immediate, intense action."

The 12-acre site in Kent, 50 miles (80 kilometers) north of New York City, is near where a 19th-century mine on Ninham Mountain once produced arsenic ore used for manufacturing pesticides, paint and wood preservatives. Mine tailings—waste rocks separated from ore—were discarded around the area, spreading [arsenic contamination](#).

The agency first became aware of high levels of arsenic in the area when the Bernses were poisoned. Back then, the state health department and Department of Environmental Conservation asked the EPA to investigate arsenic in the Bernses' well, which had been drilled through mine tailings.



In this Wednesday, June 12, 2019, photo, Eric Luther poses for a picture at his house in Carmel, N.Y. Luther's yard was covered in gravel or wood chips, by the Environmental Protection Agency, as a bulwark against high levels of arsenic in the soil. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig)

The EPA installed the water tank at their house. At several other homes, filters were installed to remove lower levels of arsenic.

The EPA and the county health department did limited soil testing near the mine and at several residential properties in the 1980s, but it took no further action because of naturally high arsenic levels in soil in the region, according to an EPA fact sheet.

Some residents are asking why the EPA is proposing a Superfund soil

cleanup only now.

"At the time, we were asked to investigate the potable water supply and make sure the water supply was protected," EPA Region 2 Administrator Pete Lopez said in an interview. "That was the limit of our engagement."

A more extensive investigation was launched in 2017 after the current residents of the Bernses' house suspected a leak in the water tank. In the course of investigating, the EPA discovered the system contained arsenic-contaminated sediment.



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"From there, we thought we need to step back and think how we can be more protective here," Lopez said.

Soil sampling of private properties near the old mine entrance revealed arsenic levels as high as 1,600 times the EPA screening level. The health advisory issued in April 2019 said long-term exposure to arsenic in soil on the properties "poses a significantly elevated risk for cancer health effects."

"Mike and I were never informed about arsenic problems" before buying the house in 2007, Luther said. "We heard it from neighbors after we moved in, that someone had their well poisoned from an old arsenic mine up the hill."

The health advisory tells residents to wash their hands and the paws of pets after contact with the soil. As an interim measure while EPA develops a permanent cleanup plan, contractors covered most of Luther's yard with [wood chips](#), installed stone paths, covered the driveway with gravel and provided heavy-duty door mats.

"We formed a neighborhood group and went to the town assessor to talk about property tax relief, since our property is now worthless," Luther said.



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Alicia and Norman Berns, sitting with Luther on his deck on a recent afternoon, said they have endured chronic health problems ever since their arsenic poisoning but don't know whether the arsenic is to blame. They sold their home for half what they paid for it and moved away in 1998.

"This is very emotional for me; it stirs up painful memories," said Alicia Berns, who has a sports marketing business and works as a producer for her husband's documentaries.

Luther's neighbor, Robert Embree, said a 1987 newspaper story about the Bernses being hospitalized for arsenic poisoning appeared the same day he was having a well drilled at the house he was building across the road from them.

"Everyone was led to believe the [arsenic poisoning](#) was an isolated incident," Embree said. "There was no discussion ever of soil."

Embree installed a reverse osmosis filtration system to protect his well water from arsenic and other contaminants. But now he worries he and his wife were exposed for decades as they worked in their yard.



In this Wednesday, June 12, 2019, photo, a sign warning pedestrians against high

levels of arsenic is displayed at a trail head in Carmel, N.Y. (AP Photo/Seth Wenig)

"When I'm mowing the lawn now, I have to worry if the dust kicking up has arsenic in it," Embree said. "I'm a prisoner in my own home."

Even if the EPA removes contaminated soil, Embree fears rain could wash more [arsenic](#) down the hill.

Potential recontamination will be addressed in EPA's cleanup plan, Lopez said, and some residents may be offered buyouts.

"I put my heart and soul into building this house," Embree said. "We have a lot of memories here. It's heartbreaking that we might have to leave."

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