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Lead levels high near gun site

Tests also show risky readings of arsenic

By Jennie Daley
Journal Staff

ITHACA — Lead and arsenic contamination found on City of Ithaca property test at concentrations that could pose a risk to human health.

Soil analyses from the property adjacent to the former Ithaca Gun Factory show levels of lead contamination as high as 184,000 parts per million. Arsenic was found in concentrations of 2,210 parts per million. Both concentrations are well above federal and state guidelines.

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The soil tests taken last week were prepared for The Ithaca Journal and Toxics Targeting of Ithaca by Buck Laboratories in Cortland. The analyses show lead in concentrations 460 times higher than the 2004 cleanup goal set by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for the former industrial site.

Arsenic levels were almost 300 times higher than state soil clean-up objectives. Levels of cadmium and chromium also exceeded the standard.

City, state and federal officials said they were

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Lead pellets sit in a depression in a rock surface just below the site of a section of the Ithaca Gun factory, above Ithaca Falls.

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Edward Jones

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aware lead pollution still existed on the factory property. However, they said an agreement established by the DEC put responsibility for that portion of the cleanup on property owner Wally Diehl. Maps show that Diehl's property is adjacent to the city property where the contaminated soil samples were found.

Diehl, who bought the property in November of 2005 for \$230,000, lives in North Carolina and was out of town and unavailable for comment for this article.

The city-owned property between the former gun factory and Ithaca Falls was put on the federal Superfund list in 2000. It was part of a \$4.8 million cleanup from 2002-2004.

"I believe there is still lead there," City of Ithaca Mayor Carolyn Peterson said of the factory site. "I can't really explain why the EPA went to a certain extent and didn't finish that portion."

The area where these toxic materials were found is at the northern section of the industrial property and just uphill from the area where the EPA removed more than 2,700 tons of contaminated soil to mitigate lead pollution.

The pollution was the result of decades of lax disposal methods for the ammunition used to test guns that were manufactured on the site for 124 years.

During the two-year cleanup, the goal was to get the city-owned property to a point where lead levels were less than 400 parts per million. Prior to the clean-up, signs were posted warning visitors to the area to be aware of the significant health hazard.

A fire at the factory three weeks ago rekindled community concerns about the property's potential threat to public health.

Last week's testing of the area was done after Walter Hang, of Ithaca's Toxics Targeting, noted the continued presence of lead shot pellets and shotgun casings in the area that was reportedly cleaned during the EPA's mitigation.



SIMON WHEELER / Journal Staff

A shotgun shell and slag sit exposed below the former Ithaca Gun factory.

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"I was appalled to find thousands of lead pellets and tons of industrial debris in an area that environmental authorities declared cleaned up in 2003," said Hang, who originally reported lead contamination to authorities in 2000.

A visit to the site last week by Ithaca Journal staff showed that lead pellets and spent shotgun shells could easily be seen in the area. The contaminated material appeared to originate from the top of a steep hillside that has been covered with blue tarps.

"The reason it was cleaned up in the first place was because of the concern for the public health. I don't know if putting tarps over it is sufficient," Mayor Peterson said.

According to officials at the EPA, the tarps were placed over soil on Diehl's property in 2004 as a temporary means of containing it until Diehl addressed the contamination.

"With those tarps, they run the risk of contaminated material being redistributed and contaminating what had been cleaned up," said Louis Derry, director of Cornell University's biogeochemistry program. "The contaminated soils have the potential to get spread around the site again just through wind and water and soil erosion. I don't think it's a disaster waiting to happen, but I think it needs to be taken care of."

While Diehl did enter into the DEC's Voluntary Cleanup Program in 2003, no remediation work has been done on his property since he signed up.

John Andersson, director of environmental health for the Tompkins County Health Department, said he could not comment on the possible public health concern without more information and further testing but did acknowledge that the lead readings were high.

"If it's migrating onto public property, that could be a problem," he said. "It sure would be a shame to recontaminate areas that have been cleaned up."

The largest health concern associated with lead is children's exposure to the substance. Numerous studies have shown that low levels of exposure can affect children's brain development and lead to behavior and cognitive problems.

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SIMON WHEELER / Journal Staff

Walter Hang of Toxics Targeting points out the areas where steep hillside surfaces are covered with blue tarpaulins at the former Ithaca Gun site. It is still possible to find lead shot, shotgun shells and slag at the base of this area.

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SIMON WHEELER / Journal Staff

Lead pellets sit in a depression just below the site of the former Ithaca Gun factory. A quarter placed next to the small spherical pellets indicates their size. Soil analyses at the site show lead levels in concentrations more than 460 times higher than the 2004 cleanup goal set by the Environmental Protection Agency. The tests were prepared by Buck Laboratories in Cortland.

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