

EPA checks second site for hazards

ALBION - Several suited, masked people entered the dim, filthy warehouse Friday afternoon. Breathing heavily into their masks, the workers approached a stack of metal canisters.

Some 200 industrial drums were labeled "non-hazardous," but that didn't put Calhoun County Treasurer Ann Rosenbaum at ease. Rosenbaum was standing outside of the former Pickens Plating, a metal plating facility at 1000 Industrial Ave. in Albion.

"They're labeled non-hazardous, but we don't know that," Rosenbaum said. That's why Rosenbaum and the city of Albion asked the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to investigate.

The building was shut down after the county foreclosed on the property in March. The site is the second county-confiscated, abandoned facility to be examined by the EPA in the past month. In May, 400 containers of unknown, corrosive materials were found at an abandoned foundry in Marshall Township.

"We know there are some drums in there," said the EPA's federal on-scene coordinator Jeff Lippert as he donned protective clothing at the Albion site. "Today we're going to do some sampling and see what's in those drums."

If toxic waste is discovered, the EPA will have to do a cleanup and extraction. The Marshall Township cleanup cost taxpayers nationally about \$200,000.

"It potentially could be nothing," Rosenbaum said of the Albion site. "If that's the case, then they'd say, (to the county) 'Here, it's your problem now.'"

No matter the outcome, taxpayers will pick up the tab. The Albion company, Pickens Plating, hadn't paid property taxes in three years and owed the county more than \$38,000, Rosenbaum said.

The county first contacted the EPA because Albion officials expressed concern about the drums inside the building, Rosenbaum said. Rosenbaum met Lippert when he was overseeing the cleanup in Marshall Township, and asked him to take a look at Albion.

Officials from the city of Albion were not available for comment Friday.

The two recent cases of abandoned waste in Calhoun County are not uncommon, said EPA on-scene coordinator Tricia Edwards. About 30 to 40 abandoned industrial waste cleanups happen throughout the Midwest each year, she said.

These cleanups can cost anywhere from tens of thousands to millions of dollars, said EPA spokesperson Mick Hans. But in the long run, "well over half" of that money is recovered, he said, from corporations.

"Here in Region 5 (the Mid-west), there are typically several dozen short-term cleanups going on at any one time," Hans said. "It takes as long as it takes to recover the funds. The point is to do it thoroughly and quickly and recover dollars if they're available so the taxpayer doesn't have to pay for it."

The process of pursuing a responsible party can take years, Hans said, while cleanup is done in a few weeks or months.

"The EPA will go after them," Rosenbaum said. "They have the attorneys. They have the knowledge. They will do the cleanup."

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