United States Environmental Protection Agency

EPA INVESTIGATES TELECOM CABLES FOR LEAD

PHILADELPHIA, PA/ REGION 3

September 2023

Current and Upcoming Activities

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) continues to closely review and act on the issues raised in the Wall Street Journal's investigation of lead covered telecommunications cables across the U.S. As part of this work, EPA sampled soil for lead in an area near some telecommunications cables in Coal Center, PA and California, PA. EPA's scientific review of the data and current conditions in the area indicate that there are no threats to the health of people nearby that would warrant an immediate EPA response action.

The results do show that some soil samples have lead concentrations above an EPA screening level of 400 parts per million. All areas tested were primarily from areas covered with grass. Well maintained grass provides a natural barrier to reduce exposure and a good cover to prevent soil dust from being easily kicked up. EPA's assessment of the data takes into account that most of the areas sampled are covered with grass and are not where children gather for long periods of time.

EPA has established a national working group to consider next steps to ensure the public remains safe. These steps may include further analyses to better understand if the cables have released and continue to release lead. Any future actions will be done in coordination with state and local leaders, and the public will remain informed of any actions taken.

In addition to sampling, EPA has required major telecommunications companies to provide us with information needed to evaluate the nature and extent of releases or threatened releases of lead from telecommunications cables and equipment in this area, including results of inspections the companies have undertaken, as well as sampling results and data.

Background from EPA

EPA uses screening-level sampling to initially characterize soil lead concentrations. On August 3-5, 2023, EPA sampled soil in publicly accessible areas directly underneath lead-covered telecommunications cables and the opposite side between the road and the sidewalk in Coal Center and California, PA communities. EPA collected 31 surface soil samples from below the lead-covered cables and 9 surface soil samples from the opposite side of the road.

Lead Contamination

There is no safe blood lead level in children. (see https://www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/docs/lead-levels-in-children-fact-sheet-508.pdf) Young children are particularly at risk for health effects from exposure to lead, and EPA will take all actions within its authorities to ensure children are safe and protected from any potential exposure.

EPA is releasing this sampling data because we value full transparency. To view the sampling data, visit EPA Website.

Lead is a naturally occuring element and has been used in a wide variety of products, including paint, ceramics, pipes, plumbing materials, solders, gasoline, batteries, ammunition, and cosmetics. Lead can affect almost every organ and system in your body. Children six years old and younger are most susceptible to the effects of lead

For more information about lead, visit:

EPA's Lead website

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention website

The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) website

Simple Steps to Reduce Your Lead Exposure

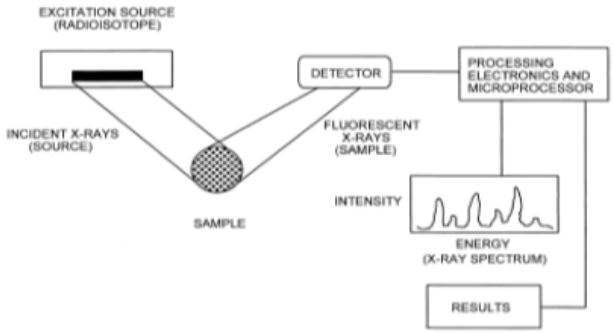
The following steps are recommended to reduce your potential exposure to lead contamination that may be present in urban soil.

- Remove shoes at the door before entering your home to prevent tracking in any dirt that may be on your shoes. Clean the bottom of your shoes with a wet wipe or paper towel.
- Wash your hands and face after coming in from outside and before eating, drinking, or smoking. Wash children's toys and items they place in their mouths.
- Avoid digging into or disturbing soil if possible, and wash hands and face afterwards.

What is XRF?

Field-portable X-ray fluorescence (FPXRF) is an analytical technique using a small, hand-held portable instrument for rapid, low-cost analysis of inorganic contaminants (aka metals) in environmental samples.

Its operating principle entails the emission of "secondary", fluorescent x-rays from a material (soil in this case) that has been excited with high energy x-rays or gamma rays from the instrument. The secondary fluorescent beam that escapes the soil is captured by a detector/analyzer that can measure the intensity and characteristics of the beam. The detector/analyzer (aka spectrometer) then uses this information to identify metals in the soil sample and their corresponding concentrations. Below is a figure denoting the instrument components:



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https://response.epa.gov/CalandCoal