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Harmful chemicals found at farm

GROUP LEASED PROPERTY TO TEACH YOUTH LIFE SKILLS

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A farm leased to a non-profit organization has high levels of harmful chemicals in the soil and possibly its groundwater, according to a report from the federal Environmental Protection Agency.

The Kentucky Department for Environmental Protection began assessing the Lewis Farm, located at the end of North Hamilton Street in Georgetown, in March 2004 after it received a report of oil seeping from the ground. The site was an oil refinery from 1905 to 1916.

Rainbow's End in the Bluegrass moved to the Lewis Farm, a private property, last fall. The group teaches youth life skills through horsemanship and Bible classes. Its operation has been on hold during the EPA assessment.

High concentrations of contaminants associated with a refinery, such as lead and chemicals called polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, were found throughout the site.

According to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, people can be exposed to PAHs through air, water, or soil near hazardous waste sites. Prolonged exposure to PAHs has caused tumors in laboratory animals as well as damage to the skin, body fluids and immune system, but these effects have not been seen in people.

But the EPA report said the contaminated soil poses "a potential direct contact threat to the public," and "the actual or threatened oil discharges may impact surface water adjacent to the site." Elkhorn Creek borders the Lewis Farm on three sides.

A cleanup will be required at the site, and another assessment will determine how long the process will take, EPA spokeswoman Laura Niles said.

Another assessment will probably look at the level of contaminants in the ground and surface water, Niles said. She said the assessment crew was aware that area residents drink city water, not ground water drawn through wells.

The crews did not find significant levels of PAHs in the air, Niles said. The main concern is that the contaminated soil not be disturbed.

"As far as surrounding residents, there are no releases that are occurring that should affect those residences because they are not drinking water from this site and we did not see any known releases of contaminants in the air," Niles said.

Karen Zamora, program director of Rainbow's End, said, "Of course it's disappointing, but I would much rather be safe than sorry."

Rainbow's End moved to the Lewis farm after the city sold part of the Bradshaw Farm property, which the group had used for three years. As many as 90 youths and volunteers attended its summer classes.

After the move, Zamora said, she was advised that children should not be allowed on the site during the soil assessment because of the possibility that they could eat the dirt. The site has been used primarily as a farm and residence since the refinery closed in 1916.

Rainbow's End kept its horses at the farm during the EPA assessment, but four of the horses were relocated in December. Two horses are still on the property and are being moved, Zamora said.

The EPA did not assess the health of the animals on the property.

Zamora said the landowner, Marie Lewis Spragens of Lebanon, had told her of the EPA assessment before Rainbow's End moved from the Bradshaw Farm, but Zamora did not expect it to delay classes this winter because she did not expect problems with the site. Spragens' mother spent her adult life on the farm and had no illnesses related to chemical exposure.

Zamora said she hopes to find other land that Rainbow's End could use, but it is possible that Rainbow's End may not continue.

"If we don't get to continue, we had an awesome three years," Zamora said. "It's kind of bittersweet."

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