

**'Not surprised'**

**EPA aware of possible lead contamination on school playgrounds**

**By Wally Kennedy**

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MIAMI, Okla. — Miami School Superintendent Bill Stephens said he was not surprised when the Environmental Protection Agency recently told him that some of his school yards were contaminated with high levels of lead.

Having recently overseen the spending of \$50,000 in school district money to remove lead-laden chat from the grounds of Roosevelt School, Stephens knew there was a good chance that other schools in Miami would need the same kind of cleanup work.

"We were not surprised to find it," said Stephens. "But, it could have been worse. We only have some small areas where the ground will need to be removed."

The cleanup, if it is funded, will involve Nichols and Wilson elementary schools in Miami, Miami Kindergarten Center and a future playground in Picher, the agency said.

Miami High School, Roosevelt and Washington elementary schools and the Miami Administration Center will need limited cleanup, the agency said.

The total cleanup, the EPA estimates, will cost approximately \$250,000.

The cleanup of the biggest and most toxic area, which is the location of a proposed school playground in Picher, represents 60 percent of the estimate.

Some levels at the Picher site are 40 times the EPA's recommended safe level for lead. Sampling of the additional sites had been scheduled

years ago, but was delayed by a federal investigation of the contractor responsible for the survey.

The Miami School District, or the state, will need to come up with a 10 percent funding match to get the federal money needed to rid their school yards of the lead-contaminated chat. The estimated cost of the cleanup in Miami is \$100,000, meaning the state or district faces a \$10,000 match.

That's not good news for Stephens. The \$50,000 spent at Roosevelt, he said, could have been spent on repairs to the air conditioners at Miami High School. Another \$10,000 spent on the removal of lead from school yards will make it that much more difficult to make ends meet at a time when the district has let three of its teachers go because of a budget crunch.

But, what is surprising to Stephens is that it has taken so long for the EPA to identify the problem. "We've known it was there," he said. "We knew we had a problem after the cleanup at Roosevelt School."

The EPA, too, has been aware of the possibility of a problem with Miami's school yards for some time.

### **Overlooked?**

Documents obtained by the Globe show that the schools in Miami and other sites characterized as high access areas for children, such as day-care centers, were targeted for sampling and possible cleanup in August 1998.

A task order modification to sample soils at the schools was authorized more than three years ago, but the sampling of those schools was only recently done. In the meantime, children in Miami have continued to play on school yards that are contaminated with high levels of lead.

Some of the 50 sites on the list, including church parking lots and a playground in Picher, were sampled and cleaned up by the contractor, Morrison-Knudson Corp., from 1998 to 2000. The contractor received a \$26 million contract to do the work. The state of Oklahoma provided a 10 percent match to clean up the sites.

But, other sites, such as the schools in Miami, were not sampled. Since they were not sampled, the sites were not scheduled for cleanup. They did not qualify for the state's 10 percent match at that time.

"They should have been sampled, but never were," said Bob Sullivan, the EPA's project manager for the Tar Creek Superfund Site.

"They concentrated on Picher and Cardin because the blood-lead levels (lead poisoning) in children were higher in those communities," he said. "They figured they would do Miami later."

In late February 2000, federal agents, including the FBI, descended on the contractor's offices at Picher to confiscate records, maps and computer files. The raid exposed an 18-month, behind-the-scenes investigation into the way Morrison-Knudson was doing business at Tar Creek.

The FBI said it was investigating "certain improprieties" in the way the company handled its contract with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, which provided oversight on the project, and the EPA, which paid for the cleanup.

No indictments have been handed down in connection with the ongoing probe by the U.S. attorney's office at Tulsa.

The raid precipitated a halt to the cleanup in May 2000. The school yards in Miami and the other high access areas targeted for sampling were never sampled.

The EPA's movement to clean up school yards in Northeast Oklahoma has been far slower than the cleanup of school yards in Southwest Missouri. The states are served by different regional administrations. Oklahoma is within the EPA's Region 6, based in Dallas. Missouri is within the EPA's Region 7, based in Kansas City.

When the cleanup of lead-contaminated properties was launched five years ago in Joplin, Mo., day-care centers, homes where children with lead poisoning lived and then the schools were among the first to be sampled and placed on a clean-up schedule.

"There was a little data glitch with the schools early on, but they were among the first to be tackled in the cleanup," said Jim Mueller, technical adviser to the Jasper County Superfund Site Coalition.

"They did the day-care centers right away and then, probably a few months into it, they did the school yards," he said. "They got at it a lot quicker than they did in Oklahoma. That's for sure."

## **Chat contamination**

Sullivan said he has held recent meetings with school and city officials to ascertain whether they can come up with a 10 percent match if the Oklahoma Legislature fails to appropriate money this spring to continue the cleanup at the Tar Creek Superfund Site, which has included Miami since 1997.

Sullivan said the city and school officials are receptive to the idea.

Sullivan said the EPA is hopeful the state will budget the \$4.3 million that Gov. Frank Keating has asked for in this year's budget to continue the cleanup at Tar Creek. Approval of the request would bring \$38.7 million in Superfund money to the area.

Keating, dissatisfied with the lack of effort being put forth on Tar Creek by Oklahoma's congressional delegation, announced Friday during the National Conference on Tar Creek IV that Oklahoma will sue the federal government to force it to act on Tar Creek.

Keating, too, said he was hopeful the state legislature would approve his budget request for Tar Creek so that the cleanup work will resume this year.

The EPA took 1,452 soil samples from 11 schools and two school properties in Miami, and one school property in Picher, earlier this year. Of those samples, 216 revealed high levels of lead, the agency said.

Of the contaminated samples, 61 came from seven sites in Miami and 155 came from one property in Picher, where a school playground is planned.

A sample from the proposed playground in Picher registered at 19,800 parts per million lead content. That is almost 40 times above the agency's acceptable level for lead. In Miami, the highest single contamination was 3,800 parts per million lead content, which is more than seven times the limit.

The EPA says a cleanup, which would replace contaminated soil with clean soil, could begin after the school year ends and could be completed before school starts this fall.

The contamination is being caused by the use of chat, a type of gravel that was a byproduct of ore production. Small amounts of lead in the blood can lead to learning deficiencies and other health problems for children.

Approximately 25 percent of the children living in the five-city mining area in Ottawa County have elevated blood-lead levels. That compares to a statewide average of 2 percent.

Mining began in Northeast Oklahoma in the early 1900s and continued for six decades. The EPA has spent nearly \$100 million since 1980 on the Tar Creek Superfund Site.