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Cleanup work begins at Miami schools

Companies to remove, replace dirt at six properties

**By Gary Garton
Globe Staff Writer**

MIAMI, Okla. - Heavy equipment took the first bites of lead-contaminated soil out of the Nichols Elementary School playground on Monday.

Environmental Protection Agency subcontractors CH2M Hill and Kingston Environmental Services have 16 working days to complete dirt removal and replacement at six school properties.

"They say they will make the deadline with a few days to spare," Superintendent Bill Stephens said. "I try to be an optimist and believe what people tell me. We'll see."

Stephens said crews plan to work four 10-hour days per week. The EPA subcontractors are using two crews, one to remove the lead-contaminated soil and the other to bring in new soil and resod the land.

"They say the work can be finished before we have kids back in the buildings," Stephens said. "If not, the work areas will be isolated and fenced off so children won't have access to them. Teachers and staff will supervise the playgrounds too. If things run a little over schedule, we're ready for that too."

The work is an extension of the EPA's Superfund cleanup in the Tar Creek mining region. While most of the work has been centered in the northern part of the county, soil testing in Miami found a number of areas with lead content exceeding 500 parts per million. That is the "action level" at which the EPA says the lead poses a health hazard to humans.

Some children in Picher, Cardin, Quapaw, Commerce and North Miami have been found to have blood-lead levels exceeding 10 micrograms per deciliter, the level at which health problems can occur.

Miami children who have been tested do not have as many high blood-lead readings, but exposure to the campus soil could pose a hazard.

The EPA has halted much of the Tar Creek Superfund site work because Oklahoma has not approved \$3.5 million in matching funds to continue the work.

At the urging of state Rep. Larry Roberts and state Sen. Rick Littlefield, the state did provide \$10,000 in matching money from its "rainy day fund" to do the work on the Miami school properties. Some of the schools have isolated "hot spots" that will need cleanup, while others will see the majority of playground soil removed.

Other properties on the list are Wilson and Washington elementary schools, Will Rogers Middle School, the high school and the district administration building.

Miami spent \$50,000 cleaning up the soil around the new Roosevelt Elementary School before it was known the EPA work would be done this year.