

EPA'S CORE WORK SUPERFUND CLEANUPS

PAST AND PRESENT THREATS

Years of disregard for the dangers of hazardous waste left a legacy of contaminated land, water and sediment that lies at the bottom of rivers, lakes and streams that poses serious threats to people's health and the natural environment. In 1980, Congress gave EPA responsibility for hazardous waste cleanups and responses to environmental emergencies, spills and natural disasters under the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act, known as Superfund.

- **Superfund Cleanups** – More than 53 million people live within three miles of a Superfund site, roughly 17 percent of the U.S. population, including 18 percent of children under the age of five. Exposure to toxic substances found at Superfund sites has been connected to a range of serious health problems, including birth defects and cancer, and contaminated soil, water and sediment can have a devastating impact on plants, fish and wildlife.

EPA's Superfund program identifies the worst contaminated sites and either cleans them up or directs polluters to do so; the goal is to return the land to productive use. As of September 2018, there were 1,345 sites on the National Priorities List of the most contaminated sites and 53 more were proposed for inclusion.

Cleanups of Superfund sites are not easy tasks. Successful cleanups require good science, thorough investigations and solutions that meet community needs.

- The cleanup process begins with a preliminary investigation and assessment to determine if contamination poses risks to people and the environment that need to be addressed immediately; action is then taken to protect against the short-term risks.
- When site contamination is significant, the site is proposed for inclusion on the National Priorities List. Sites on the list are slated for cleanups and proceed to the next phase in the cleanup process; the types of contamination – the specific chemicals, oil, radiation or other toxic substances that caused the problem – and how far they have spread are evaluated. Potential health and environmental threats are assessed and the feasibility and cost of cleanup options are identified.
- EPA then proposes a cleanup plan and, after extensive public input, finalizes the plan. Cleanups often proceed in multiple phases depending on the type of contamination that must be addressed – air, water, soil or sediment or a combination – how far the contamination has extended and the treatment or disposal options selected.

Wherever possible, the polluters who caused the contamination are required to conduct the cleanups; this saves taxpayers money while protecting the environment. For every dollar EPA spends getting polluters to pay, approximately eight dollars is gained in cleanup commitments and cost reimbursements from those responsible for the pollution. EPA conducts cleanups when parties responsible for the contamination are out of business, bankrupt or otherwise incapacitated.

The congressional mandate to clean up contaminated sites in every state and U.S. territory has protected people's health, especially in low-income communities, which host a disproportionate number of Superfund sites; returned blighted properties to productive use; and saved taxpayers billions of dollars.

- **Emergency Response** – In the aftermath of a hurricane, a terrorist attack or wildfire, you'll find EPA's highly trained teams of emergency personnel on the ground working closely with federal, state and local first responders. They monitor the air, take samples of potentially contaminated water and soil, identify threats to drinking water supplies, assess wastewater treatment facilities, evaluate hazardous waste sites, collect containers of hazardous debris and assist in the proper disposal of common household products that can be hazardous.

Over the past few years, dedicated EPA emergency response personnel have spent months in Florida, Texas, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and other areas helping state, tribal, territory and local governments in their responses to the devastating hurricanes, and in California in the aftermath of the destructive wildfires.