

EPA CORE PROGRAMS – LEGACY CONTAMINATION February 2018

ESSENTIAL WORK AT RISK

For almost 50 years, dedicated EPA employees have worked daily to improve the quality of our air, water and land, protecting our health and the environment in ways we cannot take for granted. The next generation of emerging environmental and public threats is subtler and not always as visible to the public. Consider the implications if EPA is not provided adequate resources to perform its core functions.

Past and Present Dangers

Years of disregard for the dangers of hazardous waste left a legacy of contaminated land, water and the sediment that lies at the bottom of rivers, lakes and streams that pose 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 ([1,341](#) in 2017) and either cleans up the sites or directs polluters to do so; the goal is to return the land to productive use. 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 protect against the short-term risks.
- When site contamination is significant, the site is proposed for inclusion on the National Priorities List of the country's most contaminated hazardous waste sites. 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 cleanup; 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 carries out cleanups when this is not possible.

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. Two among many, of the Superfund success stories:

- For over 50 years, West Dallas was home to a major lead smelter, RSR Corp., where wastes contaminated soil, sediment and groundwater. Wind carried lead dust into nearby parks, schools and disadvantaged neighborhoods. After the smelter's closure in 1984, EPA investigated nearly 7,000 residences and cleaned up the yards of over 400 properties. The cleanup contributed to reduced blood-lead levels in area children. If left unaddressed, elevated blood-lead levels can result in irreversible neurological deficits, such as lowered intelligence and attention-related behavioral problems. The site and surrounding area were redeveloped and now provide residents with new housing options and schools.
- A 2006 agreement with General Electric resulted in a \$2.7 billion cleanup of contaminated sediment and 300,000 pounds of polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs) being removed from the Hudson River riverbed. The historic dredging of the Hudson River PCB Superfund Site was completed in October 2015.

- **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.

- On September 11, 2001, while people were fleeing the city in panic, emergency responders immediately headed *into* New York City from EPA's New Jersey Response Center. They remained on-site at Ground Zero for months.
- The same happened when Hurricane Katrina struck New Orleans; emergency response personnel from Atlanta and Dallas were in place along the Gulf Coast ready to coordinate the massive environmental response with FEMA and multiple state agencies.
- When a devastating tornado hit Joplin, Missouri, killing 150 people and injuring hundreds more in 2011, personnel from Kansas City went in to assess the damage, monitor the air for asbestos and other dangerous air pollutants, and collect and properly dispose of hazardous debris and electronic waste.
- Dedicated EPA responders 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 last season's devastating hurricanes.

For Further information

Visit our website: www.environmentalprotectionnetwork.org

Email EPN at: info@environmentalprotectionnetwork.org or call 202-656-6229