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Tornado stirs new worries in Joplin over lead

By MIKE McGRAW
The Kansas City Star

As if Joplin weren't already facing a massive rebuilding task, the city now must deal with significant and costly lead contamination stirred up by the May 22 tornado and its after-effects.

City officials estimate that it could cost as much as \$7.5 million to clean up lead contamination re-exposed by the tornado on some 1,500 properties in damaged areas, and they have asked the federal government for help, according to an Oct. 3 letter the city sent to the Environmental Protection Agency.

"High lead levels in the disrupted soil potentially represent a significant liability issue for Joplin, and a safety hazard for our community as well as a possible impediment to our rebuilding efforts," according to the EPA letter from Joplin Mayor Michael Woolston. High lead levels in children can cause cognitive and developmental disorders.

EPA officials said late Wednesday that they were working with the city to help identify and restore the properties, adding that the agreement "will include some type of funding mechanism."

In the meantime, however, the city has stopped issuing building permits for some highly contaminated properties in heavily damaged areas until the contamination has been cleaned up.

Properties can be remediated by hauling off contaminated soil or adding layers of topsoil, depending on the level of contamination, according to Jasper County officials.

Lead and cadmium contamination has long been an issue in Joplin, much of which is honeycombed by long-abandoned lead and zinc mines.

The EPA began a massive cleanup effort around Joplin in the early 1990s that is still going on. About 2,400 contaminated properties, mostly in northwest Joplin, were eventually cleaned up by hauling out contaminated soil and replacing it with clean soil.

Some areas of the city remain part of an EPA Superfund site.

But the May 22 tornado, which killed 162 people and damaged about 7,500 residences, also disturbed ground that had long encapsulated toxic levels of lead.

In fact, many of the older homes destroyed or damaged by the tornado were built on contaminated fill material called "chat" that was hauled from the mining operations.

"This was used by builders before the high lead levels in the chat were realized, because it was fairly cheap and readily available," according to the city's letter to the EPA.

In addition, in the aftermath of the tornado, foundations and driveways were broken up, re-exposing that material, city officials said.

"As a direct result of the devastating EF5 tornado ... the city of Joplin has developed concerns about the lead levels in the tornado-affected area due to the removal of the loose tornado debris and the disruption of the soil, which has exposed mined waste throughout the affected area," the city's letter said.

Of 43 properties tested after the tornado by the Jasper County Health Department, 19 had a "yard average" above 400 parts per million, a level that requires remediation. Fourteen additional properties had at least one sample above 400 parts per million.

"The results represent significant lead findings in the tornado affected area," the city said.

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The city added that much of the affected area qualifies as low to moderate income, meaning "property owners may have no way to remediate their yard"

Dan Pekarek, director of the Joplin Health Department, said Wednesday that the earlier remediation efforts finally brought down the number of children with higher-than-normal lead levels, and the city wants to ensure that those levels do not rise again in the wake of the tornado.

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