

Asheville area CTS site cleanup timeline murky

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SKYLAND — Federal officials said on Thursday they don't know when work will begin or how much it could cost to clean up contamination at and around the CTS of Asheville site on Mills Gap Road.

The Superfund site has been proposed for inclusion on a list of the nation's most environmentally contaminated sites, which could lead to a more extensive investigation and cleanup at the site.

But Environmental Protection Agency officials said it is too early to tell how long it will take until the air, water and soil at the site is free of toxins, and how much more money will be put into the cleanup.

“It depends on the contamination and the complexity,” said Samantha Urquhart-Foster, remedial project manager with the EPA. “This is pretty complex so it will take quite a while.”

The EPA has been investigating contamination at and around the plant since 1990 and spent at least \$1 million there. Agency officials were here on Thursday to brief residents on what listing would mean for the site.

If it's listed on the National Priorities List, the CTS site will join about 1,290 other contaminated sites across the country, including 35 in North Carolina and six in Western North Carolina.

Funding for cleaning up the around 40,000 Superfund sites in the U.S. has remained flat since 2000, and the president is proposing a \$70 million reduction in funding, said Jennifer Wendel, National Priorities List coordinator at the EPA.

But inclusion of the CTS site on the list would open up more federal money for determining the extent of the contamination and for cleanup.

“One thing that listing a site on the NPL does, is it is a backstop for cleanup funding” if there is no viable company to pay for it or if the EPA can't reach an agreement with the company, Wendel said. “If there is a viable company out there and we couldn't reach an agreement with them we would still go after them to try to recover the costs, which is all for the benefit of the taxpayer.”

Residents living near the plant said they don't think listing the site on the priorities list will get it cleaned up fast enough. They want the EPA to prompt stronger action that would start cleanup activities immediately.

High levels of the industrial solvent trichloroethylene, or TCE, were discovered in drinking water wells near the plant in 1999. Contamination since has shown up in a handful of other drinking water wells surrounding the site.

TCE was used in manufacturing industrial switches and resistors at the site from 1952-86.

“The longer things drag out, as they've already been dragged out for 20 years, the more it is going to continue to disperse,” said Pat Dunn, who lives a mile from the site and whose son contracted thyroid cancer. “I would like them to immediately start cleaning it up, raze the building and treat the soil underneath.”