



At a Glance

Catalyst for Improving the Environment

Why We Did This Review

In response to a congressional request, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Office of Inspector General (OIG) opened a Hotline case to examine the quality of recent EPA water and air sampling at the Mills Gap Site (Site) located in Asheville, North Carolina. We also reviewed whether EPA clearly communicated sampling results to residents.

Background

The Site has been in the State of North Carolina's hazardous waste clean-up program since 1993. EPA Region 4 has carried out emergency response actions at the Site since 1999. These actions included providing an alternative drinking water source for residents with unsafe levels of the chemical trichloroethylene, or TCE, in their drinking water. EPA's current role is to ensure compliance with clean-up agreements and assess the extent of Site contamination.

For further information, contact our Office of Congressional, Public Affairs and Management at (202) 566-2391.

To view the full report, click on the following link:
www.epa.gov/oig/reports/2010/20100517-10-P-0130.pdf

EPA Activities Provide Limited Assurance of the Extent of Contamination and Risk at a North Carolina Hazardous Waste Site

What We Found

The water and air quality sampling conducted at the Mills Gap Site has provided limited assurance of the extent of water and air contamination and risk at the Site. Within the records OIG reviewed, Region 4 adhered to accepted standards and practices in conducting its drinking water sampling in 2008 and 2009. However, the limited scope of Region 4's past sampling activities and oversight kept the Region from detecting groundwater contamination in drinking water wells. Region 4 also adhered to accepted standards and practices in conducting its 2007-2008 air sampling. However, an ineffective response action has not addressed the potential air quality risk that remains.

Region 4's letters to affected residents communicating water and air sample results contained jargon and technical language, did not clearly communicate safety issues, and could have been misleading to some. Although there have been some improvements in communications, Region 4's drinking water letters did not disclose that water samples were only tested for site-related contaminants and the results do not indicate the overall safety of the water.

Region 4's Community Involvement Plan did not reflect all Site activities and did not include a communication strategy. Region 4 staff have not always documented conversations with residents or Site visits. These shortcomings impede Region 4's ability to effectively manage community concerns and relationships. This complex site is of great interest to the community and poses public health risks. Region 4 must take into account these issues as it completes its response work and transitions the Site to the State.

What We Recommend

We recommend that Region 4 develop a plan for Site transition to the State, clarify resident communications, update the Community Involvement Plan, and improve recordkeeping. Region 4 generally agreed with five of our six recommendations. The remaining recommendation is under further review by the Region. The Acting Regional Administrator said the Region "will do everything within our authority to ensure the safety of the residents in the Mills Gap area."