Major Milestone Reached in Protecting Omaha Children

By John B. Askew, EPA Regional Administrator

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has just completed removing lead-contaminated soil from the 1,000th residential yard in Omaha this year. After removing the contaminated soil, we brought in clean soil and installed sod, all actions aimed at protecting Omaha children.

This investment in protecting the health and future of Omaha children is unprecedented. Nowhere else in the country since the Superfund was authorized in 1980 has EPA been able to clean up 1,000 yards in one year. And EPA Region 7 has met the challenge three years in a row.

Why should readers care? Because exposure of young children to lead can cause irreversible damage to the brain and central nervous system, resulting in impaired growth, lower IQ levels and aggressive behaviors. These could be YOUR kids or YOUR grandchildren. They matter to YOU, to Omaha and to EPA as we have demonstrated by our actions to alleviate lead poisoning through yard cleanups.

Ill-informed critics have questioned why EPA is spending so much time and resources on yard remediation. It's simple. We are focusing on correcting the greatest source of danger to Omaha children from lead. That last statement is true despite contentions that the greatest threat to Omaha children comes from lead paint. In many cities lead-based paint is the major culprit. Not so in Omaha.

Lead generated from the ASARCO lead-smelting plant, in amounts far exceeding all the lead-based paint that could have fallen on the ground, landed in thousands of yards in east-central Omaha for the decades the plant was in operation. That lead was not your fault or under your control. At the request of Omaha's City Council EPA came in to remove the lead.

Our yard cleanups have demonstrated significant positive results. The incidence of childhood lead poisoning has dropped significantly since EPA soil cleanups began in 1999. In the seven-zip code area within the Omaha Lead Site, childhood blood lead exceedences have declined from 9.1% in 2000 to 3.9% in 2006. Visit EPA's website link below to view this information. http://www.epa.gov/region07/cleanup/superfund/sites/omaha_ne_blood_lead.pdf

EPA has completed soil cleanups at almost 4,000 residential properties since 1999, successfully taking away the lead-contaminated soil from both smelter fallout and any historic chipping exterior lead paint. Parents can now feel good about children playing in these restored yards without concern for historic lead contamination. However, as many as 10,000 additional homes may have unsafe levels of lead in their yards. EPA will strive not only to maintain a record-setting pace for soil cleanups, but will also continue to work with other agencies and local organizations to control other lead exposure sources that are outside EPA's direct authority.

EPA and the City of Omaha have partnered to perform lead-based paint stabilization at homes where loose, flaking lead-based paint may threaten the continued effectiveness of the soil cleanup. That is where the potential exists for soils to become recontaminated. EPA has completed exterior lead-based paint assessments at 1,775 properties. This work will continue over the winter.

The city's Lead Hazard Control Program has performed lead-based paint stabilization at fewer than 20 homes in partnership with EPA, but the city is stepping up its program to try to catch up with EPA soil cleanups.

We have made sure that contracts for cleanup work included financial incentives to encourage local hiring and spending. More than 85 percent of the workers at the site this year were hired locally.

We know there is much more work to be done. Under our interim remedy, which addresses the most highly contaminated yards, we expect most yard cleanups to be completed next year --- except for homeowners who refuse to give us access to their properties so cleanups can be done. We will continue to work to solve the access problem.

We expect to announce the final comprehensive remedy in December, 2008. Attacking the greatest source of lead contamination and working with others to ensure that secondary contamination sources are also alleviated, our goal is to help make Omaha lead-safe for children now and in the future.

(John Askew is regional administrator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, Region 7, in Kansas City. He is a 6th-generation farmer from Thurman, Iowa.)