

Sampling for Arsenic and Lead in Soil

Tacoma Smelter Plume

April 2014

Your yard may have arsenic or lead in the soil. This list of frequently asked questions explains how sampling works in the Yard Sampling and Cleanup Program (Yard Program).

Q: Am I required to participate in sampling?

A: No, this is a voluntary program and you may opt out now. However, we strongly encourage you to participate because the soil in your yard could have high levels of arsenic and lead.

Q: Can I decline the program now and join later?

A: No, if you decline or fail to respond, you will not be able to join the program later.

Q: What does sampling cost homeowners?

A: There is no cost to the homeowner for sampling and analysis in this program.

Q: How does sampling work?

A: Before we can sample, the homeowner must sign an access agreement that gives us permission to access the yard. Sampling involves boring small holes with a 1-inch soil probe and removing the soil samples from the tool. Each yard will be divided into 1 to 4 units. For lots over a quarter acre, we will work with you to identify the areas you use the most—"high use areas". These may include play areas, lawns, or garden beds.

Q: Will sampling hurt my lawn? How will you avoid damaging my sprinklers with your sampling tools?

A: The sampling equipment we use is very small. It is similar to aerating your yard. You will likely not even notice we have sampled. Our sampling team will take care to locate the sprinkler heads and lines. However, there is no guarantee that we can locate all parts of your sprinkler system. We may ask the homeowner to be present during sampling to help us locate the system.

Q: I'm planning to sell my home soon. Should I still sign up for sampling?

A: Yes, we encourage you to sign up for sampling even if you are planning to sell your home. Some homebuyers are already aware of the Tacoma Smelter Plume and may want to see sampling results. Sample results and cleanup offers are attached to the property, not the property owner. If your property qualifies for cleanup, it will still qualify under a new owner.

Q: What is the risk of arsenic and lead to human health?

A: There is no immediate danger, but long-term, daily exposure slightly raises the risk of certain health problems. Arsenic can cause cancer and lead can harm children's developing brains and nervous systems. The health risk comes from breathing or swallowing it. Healthy actions like hand-washing and keeping toys clean lowers the chance of accidentally swallowing soil.

Q: Can I rely on my neighbor's results to see what levels are on my property?

A: No - results vary between properties, sometimes to a high degree. One house could have lower levels than the house next door if soil has been moved or mixed during a building or landscape project.

Q: When will I receive my sampling results?

A: You should receive the results within 1 to 2 months of sampling.

Q: Can I get wooded areas sampled, even if Ecology cannot clean it up?

A: Yes, we will be offering educational sampling for areas we cannot clean up. This may include woods or gardens you do not want dug up. Within reason, we will take extra samples from places you are most concerned about.

Q: What results will qualify my yard for the state-funded soil removal program?

A: We are offering to remove and replace soil for yards with arsenic 100 parts per million (ppm) or higher, or lead 500 ppm or higher.

Q: What if my yard has arsenic above the state cleanup level of 20 ppm arsenic but below the action level of 100 ppm?

A: In this case, your yard would not be eligible for the state-funded soil removal program. We would advise you on how to reduce contact with soil. We would also recommend healthy actions such as washing hands, taking shoes off at the door, regular vacuuming, and dusting with a damp cloth.

Q: Am I required to remove soils from my own yard?

A: No, Ecology will not require you to clean up contaminated soil found in your yard.

Q: Do I have to disclose my results if I sell my home?

A: The Seller's Disclosure Statement (Form 17) does ask about soil contamination on the property. We recommend consulting with a real estate professional if you have questions about disclosure. Keep in mind that all yard sampling and cleanup data will be available on Ecology's public database.

Q: Will having data about contamination hurt my property value?

A: We do not know how contamination impacts property values. Hundreds of thousands of properties in the Tacoma Smelter Plume could have contamination. We can work with sellers and their real estate agents to put sampling results in context. We can also advise on ideas for reducing contact with contamination by covering bare soils.

Questions? For more information about soil sampling in the Yard Program, contact:

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www.ecy.wa.gov/toxics/tacoma-smelter.html



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