

Walla Walla gasoline spill and cleanup

Stillwater Holdings Chevron cleanup site



Emergency response

The Department of Ecology responded to gas odors in the basement of the Marcus Whitman Hotel in September 2023. Air quality testing identified potentially harmful vapors and gasoline in the basement. The hotel was evacuated immediately. Vapors were also detected in two nearby buildings.

For the next month, ventilation was required to reduce dangerous fumes, and gasoline-contaminated groundwater was pumped from the affected buildings. Once the threat to the community lowered in October, then the response shifted to remediation.

Based on sampling results, Stillwater Holdings Chevron was identified as the source of the spill. It continues to impact two neighboring properties. The owner began negotiating with Ecology in early 2024 to clean up contaminated soil and groundwater under the Model Toxics Control Act (MTCA).

Polluter is responsible by law

Under federal and state laws, polluters are responsible for responding to and cleaning up a spill. Underground storage tank owners and operators are required to maintain an insurance policy or another form of financial assurance at a minimum of \$1 million in liability coverage.

Stillwater Holdings' insurance policy includes up to \$1 million to cover potential spills and leaks. After being identified, the owner hired an environmental consultant and contractor to investigate and help create a cleanup plan. In November, the owner informed Ecology and local officials that they were working with their insurance company to fund and remove the leaking tank, and then clean up the contaminated soil.

Funding issues

Stillwater Holdings told Ecology that insurance funds were almost depleted on May 9. They said they could pay for little or no more work. And they expected Ecology to take on the remaining cleanup, including removing the leaking tank and other equipment.

At this time, Stillwater Holdings has not provided evidence that they have exhausted all financial means for conducting the cleanup. According to state law, Ecology cannot use taxpayer funds to pay cleanup costs for private companies when they still have money available. Ecology can only step in when:

- The entity responsible exhausts all financial means of conducting the cleanup,
- The entity is bankrupt, or
- The site has been abandoned.

Taking over the cleanup

Ecology is preparing to take over cleanup when Stillwater has exhausted all its funds because the site poses significant risks to the community. Ecology has also started an emergency contracting process to continue cleanup after Stillwater Holdings' insurance is depleted.

Mitigating potentially harmful vapors in the hotel and nearby building remains the highest priority. Because the leaking tank has been emptied, removing the underground tanks will be postponed.

Legal action and cost recovery

Due to the owner's lack of financial resources and inability to execute planned work, the original cleanup plan is no longer valid. If a new plan cannot be negotiated, Ecology may take legal action. Ecology will also seek cost recovery for all funds and resources expended and has the authority to place a lien on the property if necessary.

Millions more required

Cleaning up the site will not be cheap. Removing the outdated underground tank system to access the contaminated soil is expected to cost \$1.5 – \$2 million. Long-term groundwater monitoring and treatment will be required for the next 10 years and will cost about \$2 million too.

In addition, Ecology's emergency response combined with the lost revenue to local businesses is estimated at \$4 million.

Money from the legislature

In March, the Legislature increased Ecology's spending authority for the MTCA Toxics Control Operating Account, making \$1 million available for cleaning up the site in the 2023–25 biennium. Another \$500,000 could be available from this source in the next biennium.

This existing funding will not be sufficient to complete the cleanup. Ecology is currently evaluating additional funding strategies to remove the existing underground tank system and contaminated soil, and to install and operate a groundwater pump-and-treat system to remove fuel contamination.

What's next

Summer 2024

Contracting to conduct vapor and sump water mitigation.

Summer 2024 to early 2025

Contracting for structural assessment and design-level work for the permanent vapor and contaminated sump water mitigation; cost estimates for removal of underground storage tank system and contaminated soil.

2025

Redesign of vapor and water mitigation to remove equipment from Building 106 property. Public works contracting to conduct removal of storage tank system and contaminated soil. Additional contracting to design and install a groundwater pump-and-treat system.

2025–2026

Underground storage tank system removal, contaminated soil removal and disposal, groundwater pump-and-treat system installation.

2026–2036

Long-term operation and maintenance of vapor mitigation, sump water mitigation, and groundwater pump-and-treat system.

Questions?

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