Frequently Asked Questions about
Montesano soil & ground water investigation

from Ecology's Toxics Cleanup Program, Southwest Regional Office

Q: Why is the Department of Ecology studying contaminated soil and ground water in downtown Montesano?

A: The state Department of Ecology has been working in Montesano for many years, investigating several individual sites contaminated with gasoline. We want to discover if pollution from these sites may be joined together due to the area's shallow ground water and other factors, and ensure human health and the environment are protected. Because we know there is contamination, we are obligated to follow up and investigate.

Q: Where did the contamination come from?

A: The primary contaminant that has been found in ground water below Montesano is gasoline. Some diesel and solvents have also been discovered. Montesano was once a major stop-over for motorists traveling to ocean beaches, and the city had a lot of gas stations. These have since closed down and some may have closed without properly removing fuel from their underground storage tanks. Some of these old tanks, along with others that belong to stations currently operating in downtown, may have leaked, contaminating the soil and ground water. There could be other sources of contamination as well. One purpose of this investigation is to identify where the contamination came from, and where it is going.

Montesano's contamination circumstances are not unique. If we looked at other cities with a similar history, we'd probably find similar problems with gasoline-contaminated ground water.

Q: What is the Department of Ecology going to do about the contamination?

A: We don't know what the final outcome will be of our investigation. We plan to keep the community well informed and involved, and work closely with the community on solutions.

Q: Is the city's drinking water safe?

A: The city receives its drinking water from sources located outside of downtown, away from the contaminated ground water. Local health officials say these sources of drinking water are safe. There appears to be no immediate health concern to people who drink city water.

Q: Are there other human health and safety concerns?

A: We want to make sure people who live and work in downtown Montesano are safe. A possible health concern with underground petroleum contamination is vapors. When more is known about the contamination, we may test for petroleum vapors within downtown buildings

where the level of contamination, depth of ground water, soils and building structure are likely to create such vapors within indoor air.

If vapor testing is needed and indoor air problems are found, we will work with the local health department and the community to ensure the long-term health of Montesano residents is protected.

If you are noticing petroleum or other types of chemical odors in buildings unrelated to known sources, or have a drinking or irrigation well in the downtown area, please contact Marv Coleman, Ecology's site manager, at 360-407-6259 or e-mail him at MCOL461@ecy.wa.gov.

Q: How is this contamination affecting the environment?

A: Besides possible indoor vapors mentioned in the previous answer, the contamination may be making its way to the Chehalis River and nearby wetlands. In the late 1980s, the city of Montesano abandoned an old sanitary sewer system and built a new system under a grant provided by Ecology. Both the abandoned sanitary system and the city's underground storm water system discharge into the nearby Chehalis River and adjacent wetlands. Contaminated ground water could be entering the old systems or could be traveling along these underground corridors to the Chehalis River.

We will be sampling both the sanitary and storm water systems to help us better understand how the contamination may be affecting the environment.

Q: What is the Department of Ecology's role in these kinds of projects?

A: Ecology's toxics cleanup program oversees the clean up of contaminated sites in Washington. Ecology works with property owners, local governments, other state agencies, the legislature and community partners to achieve a cleaner and safer Washington. For this phase of the investigation, we are working closely with the city of Montesano. We've briefed the city council about the project and are coordinating with the public works director. We plan to keep the community, especially the affected businesses and residents, well informed.

Q: What is the goal of the project?

A: Our overall goal is to identify the extent of the contamination and where the contamination is located. Once these are identified, a decision can be made about how to best deal with it. The Montesano community will play a key role in helping us make that decision.

Q: Who is responsible for cleaning up the contamination? Who pays?

A: Ecology is conducting the current investigation. The work being performed by Ecology and consultants is paid for with Clean Sites Initiative funds. Under state law (Model Toxics Control Act, Chapter 173-340 WAC), current property owners are responsible for clean up of contamination on their property. Past property owners and operators also are responsible for clean up of contamination they caused. When a local government is responsible for clean up of contamination, the state offers grants to lessen the effect of cleanup costs on taxpayers and ratepayers. For this early investigation, the state is paying for all the work being done.

Q: Given this contamination occurs in other locations, why Montesano? Why now?

A: Gasoline/petroleum contaminated ground water is a common problem in Washington. Ecology is investigating Montesano's contamination because:

- There are potential human health and environmental risks with this kind of ground water contamination, and we want to protect the people of Montesano and the Chehalis River.

- The contamination was discovered through other site investigations and now that we know it exists, we have an obligation to act.

- Addressing Montesano's contamination problem may be fairly easy compared to larger, more complex cities.

Q: What happens next?

A: Ecology will keep the city and community well-informed of investigation activities and results. Ecology's ongoing monitoring of existing wells and new borings provide important information about the location and extent of the contamination. We will summarize this information in a report due later this summer. In the report, we will describe the contamination and determine if more information is needed. Once the report is available, Ecology will share the results with the community and work with Montesano to determine what the next steps will be.

Q: How will the community be kept informed?

A: The Department of Ecology, in partnership with the city of Montesano, will inform the community in a variety of ways, including through The Vidette and Aberdeen Daily World. We will routinely brief the city council and local chamber of commerce. We plan to mail information to affected property owners and tenants. We'll be looking for additional ways to keep the community well informed as the project progresses. If you have ideas about how you'd like to hear from us, please let us know. Contact Cedar Bouta at 360-407-6245 or e-mail her at CEBO461@ecy.wa.gov with your ideas.

Q: Who can I contact for more information?

If you have questions about the contamination or have information to share, please contact Marv Coleman, Ecology's site manager, at 360-407-6259 or e-mail him at MCOL461@ecy.wa.gov.

The news media should contact Ecology's public information officer, Sandy Howard, at 360-407-6239 or e-mail her at SRUD461@ecy.wa.gov.

Ecology's website for this project contains information such as this FAQ sheet. The website address is: www.ecy.wa.gov/programs/tcp/sites/montesano/montesano_hp.htm

If you require this publication in an alternate format, please contact Cedar Bouta at 360-407-6245 or CEBO461@ecy.wa.gov. For TTY, please call 711 or 1-800-833-6388.

Schedule of Activities Related to Montesano Groundwater Study

As of June 10, 2005

Activity	***Estimated Timeframe***
Sample existing groundwater monitoring wells (34 wells in 8 locations)	Twice a year in October and March
Complete first phase of geoprobe borings to define the location and extent of contamination	Spring and Summer 2005
Review the city's drinking water monitoring data from their regular monitoring program; determine if more specific monitoring is needed	Summer 2005
Complete second phase of geoprobe borings to refine the location and extent of contamination	Summer and Fall 2005
Make interim sampling data available to property owners/operators, city officials, residents, and the public	Summer 2005
Sample utility systems and corridors in areas with contaminated groundwater and at their outfalls	Fall 2005
Sample indoor air in buildings where contamination is determined to be severe and groundwater depth, soils and building structure indicate indoor air problems are likely	Fall 2005
Make interim sampling data available to the property owners/operators, city officials, residents, and the public	Winter 2005 though Winter 2006
Provide data and work with city officials as the study progresses	Ongoing
Work with property owners/operators to identify and address contamination on specific properties	Ongoing