



Tacoma Smelter Plume Cleanup Project

Progress and Funding Updates

Washington State Department of Ecology
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Introduction

For nearly 100 years, Asarco operated a copper smelter in north Tacoma. Air pollution from the smelter settled on the surface soil across more than 1,000 square miles of the Puget Sound region. Arsenic, lead, and other metals remain in the soil because of this pollution. This area is called the Tacoma Smelter Plume.

Arsenic and lead are toxic metals that pose risks to human health if the contaminated soil is ingested or inhaled. While low levels of these metals pose no immediate danger to public health, long-term daily exposures raise risk of health problems. Lead is linked to developmental disabilities in children and may affect IQ. Arsenic may cause some types of cancers later in life and can contribute to heart disease. Children under age six are at greatest risk because their bodies are still developing, and they are more likely to put things in their mouths.

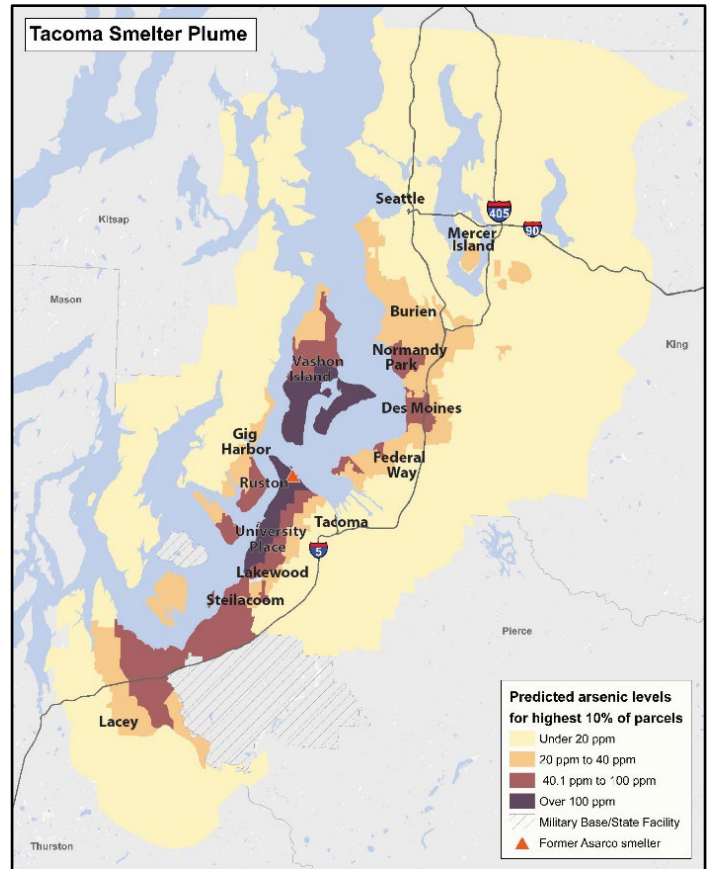


Figure 1: Map of predicted arsenic levels for highest 10% of parcels

Addressing Tacoma Smelter Plume Contamination

Ecology's remediation plan for the Tacoma Smelter Plume (TSP) is detailed in the [2012 Final Interim Action Plan](#)¹. Chapter 5 of the Interim Action Plan describes our Phase One priorities, which are protecting children, removing the highest levels of arsenic and lead from residential yards, providing outreach and services to affected communities, and supporting developers working in contaminated soil.

The **Soil Safety Program** removes and replaces contaminated soil in the play areas of licensed childcares (including in-home daycares), parks, and schools where the arsenic level is at 20 parts per million (ppm) or higher². We have sampled over 1,200 play areas and acted on nearly all 150 locations with elevated arsenic or lead. The Department of Children, Youth and Families requires new childcares to contact us regarding sampling before issuing a license.

¹ <https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/publications/SummaryPages/1209086.html>

² 20 ppm is the state cleanup level for arsenic under the Model Toxics Control Act (MTCA) Cleanup Regulations.

The **Yard Program** offers free sampling and voluntary soil replacement to eligible residential properties. To qualify, a property must be within the Yard Program boundary (see Figure 2) and have 100 ppm or higher of arsenic. To date, we have found over 1,200 qualifying properties and have replaced the soil in 415 yards.

Dirt Alert is our outreach and education program. Our [searchable map](#)³ shows locations we tested, properties that qualified for soil replacement, and those that had their soil replaced. We also partner with local health departments and trusted nonprofits to educate people throughout the TSP. These partners hold soil testing events and promote our [Healthy Actions](#), such as handwashing, gardening with gloves, and covering bare dirt.

The **Technical Assistance Program** offers guidance to developers to sample and clean up contaminated soil. Since we only have predicted contamination levels for most of the 1,000 square miles of the TSP, we recommend developers test their soil before beginning work. In some cases, local jurisdictions require developers to consult with us before issuing a permit, and require developers to join our Voluntary Cleanup Program if the contamination is above the state cleanup level. To date, 3,797 acres have been sampled, with 2,330 acres showing elevated arsenic or lead. Cleanup has been completed on 1,463 acres. The remaining 867 acres are awaiting cleanup.



Figure 2: Yard Program Service Area

Funding

Initial cleanup of the Asarco smelter was overseen by the EPA through the federal [Superfund](#) program. When Asarco filed for bankruptcy in 2005, the state of Washington received nearly \$95 million for liability associated with the Tacoma smelter in 2009. Pursuing a financial settlement from Asarco is consistent with a key principle of Washington's cleanup law, the Model Toxics Control Act (MTCA): polluters pay. The funds were placed in an interest-bearing account established by the Legislature called the [Cleanup Settlement Account](#). Each year, Ecology submits a [report to the legislature](#)⁴ showing how we use the Cleanup Settlement Account to distribute funds to specific projects, including the Tacoma Smelter Plume Project.

To date, almost two thirds of the funds have been spent on residential yard, childcares, and play area cleanup. The legislature also directed spending \$5 million of these funds to the [Dune Park development](#)⁵ and \$400K for closing and filling the Ruston Tunnel. If the current rate of spending and yard replacement continues, the remaining funds are estimated to run out at the end of the 2031-2033 Biennium.

The Yard Program replaces the soil of about 75 residential properties per biennium, and we've cleaned up over one-third of the properties to date. By the 2033-35 Biennium, we estimate that

³ <https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/dirtalert>

⁴ <https://ecology.wa.gov/about-us/who-we-are/our-programs/toxics-cleanup/tcp-legislative-reports#CSA>

⁵ <https://www.parkstacoma.gov/project/dune-peninsula-at-point-defiance-park/>

approximately 350 of the nearly 1,200 yards qualifying for soil replacement will still need cleanup. To complete the remaining yard cleanups and continue outreach in impacted communities, we will need an estimated \$40 million in additional funds or \$10 million for each of the following 4 biennia (2033-35, 2035-37, 2037-39, and 2039-41). Timelines and financial numbers are both subject to change, as factors such as inflation can alter how much work current funding can support.

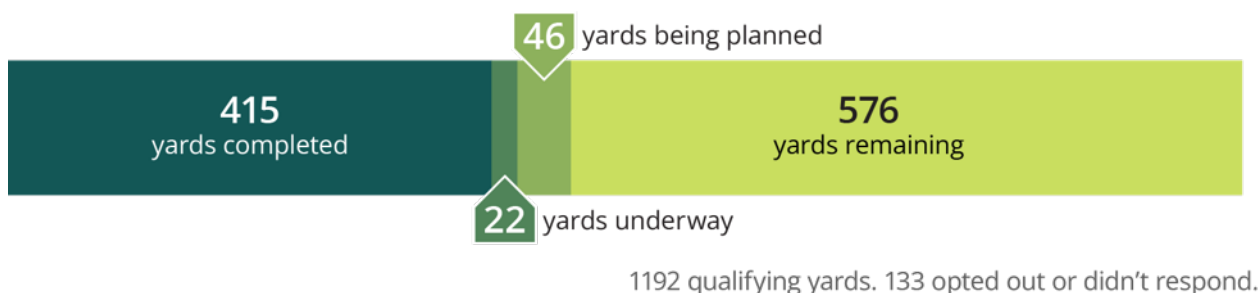


Figure 3: Yard Program Progress Bar

Looking Ahead

Phase Two of the Tacoma Smelter Plume (TSP) Interim Action Plan involves developing and implementing sustainable approaches to address the following issues:

- How to inform buyers about the soil contamination during real estate transactions.
- How to support a sustainable approach to cleanup during property development.
- How to support continued outreach to current residents.

We are currently exploring options to address these issues in consultation with realtors, developers, and local governments.

First, we regularly hear concerns from recent homebuyers who learn about the contamination only after purchasing a home. We plan to create tools for buyers to learn about the TSP before they purchase a property. Currently, we are discussing what resources would be most effective with the Washington Realtors Association and other stakeholders.

Second, we are also working with local governments to find ways to get more developers to consult with our Technical Assistance Program before developing land affected by the TSP. Under this Program, developers are encouraged to use our guidance on how to sample and safely remediate soil based on the contamination levels. Our TSP Model Remedies were designed to align well with development activities, but local jurisdictions don't always require developers to work with us.

In May 2026, we met with City of Tacoma planners to discuss this issue. We highlighted the City of Federal Way code that requires developers to consult with us before permits are issued. Within Tacoma, we can only provide comments on projects needing State Environmental Policy Act (SEPA) review. However, such reviews are only required for larger projects or projects in environmentally sensitive areas. We appreciate the opportunity to talk with local planning departments and will continue to reach out to jurisdictions most affected by the TSP.

Finally, we are examining the sustainability of our outreach to current residents in the plume. We rely on local organizations who are trusted messengers in the community. Our partnerships in Pierce and King County are focused on helping residents understand arsenic and lead contamination in their soil. Our long-standing partnership with the Tacoma-Pierce County Health Department provides excellent value for the strong work they do. In King County, we are building a new cost-effective partnership with the King Conservation District, which has expertise in soil health and strong connections to the gardening community. This year, their event planning team allowed us to host 4 Soil Shop events in south King County: Des Moines, Burien, Federal Way, and Vashon Island. Soil Shops provide residents with an opportunity to get their yard and garden soil immediately tested for arsenic and lead using a handheld machine. We tested over 350 soil samples for 192 individuals. We are looking forward to working with them in the future.

Conclusion

Using the Asarco bankruptcy settlement funds, we continue to clean up the most contaminated residential yards and childcares. We are also conducting outreach to property owners and providing technical assistance to developers. Looking ahead, we are exploring sustainable options to ensure property owners, prospective purchasers, and developers will continue to be aware of the Tacoma Smelter Plume and know how to manage the risks.

However, we will not be able to continue our work after the 2031-33 Biennium without additional funding. Without the funding, several hundred yards in North Tacoma and Vashon-Maury Island with high levels of arsenic will not be cleaned up. Our other outreach work – including soil testing for residents and supporting developers cleaning up contamination across South King County, Pierce County, and Thurston County – will likely end as well.

Publication Information

This document is available on the Department of Ecology's website at:
<https://apps.ecology.wa.gov/publications/summarypages/XXXXXX.html>

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