

Insecticide detected in Nemo wells

Lawrence County Centennial 10/23/96

By **GEORGE LEDBETTER**

The U.S. Forest Service started providing bottled water to some Nemo residents late last week, after traces of an insecticide once used to control infestations of mountain pine beetle were detected in seven private wells near the agency's Nemo Work Center.

Levels of the chemical, ethylene dibromide (EDB), varied in the shallow wells, but one tested as high as 5,000 parts per trillion, Forest Service spokesman Glenn McNitt said Monday. State water quality standards set a limit of less than 50 parts per trillion of EDB.

EDB is considered an animal carcinogen (cancer-causing agent) but has not been directly linked to increased cancer risk in humans, according to a Forest Service press release.

Wells near the Nemo Work Center were tested for the chemical last week, after a Forest Service employee alerted the agency to a site where 200 to 250 five-gallon containers of an EDB-diesel fuel mixture might be buried, McNitt said. "The employee remembered the material was in five-gallon gas cans, but didn't know for sure if it was EDB," he said.

Special testing was required to detect the

EDB, which is colorless, odorless and tasteless in small quantities such as those present in the Nemo wells, and is not revealed by the normal tests for minerals and bacteria in drinking water.

Four burial dumps in a quarter-acre site near

'It's hard to say how many people might have been affected. If we have to contact anybody that ever drank from the wells, it could affect a lot of people.'

- Glenn McNitt
Forest Service spokesman

the work center are currently being excavated to depths of about 20 feet in an effort to find and remove the contaminants, said McNitt. Although a crew from Salt Lake City-based EnviroSearch International worked through the weekend, the

cans had not been located by Monday morning he said.

The dump area is located near the Forest Service residence building behind the old Nemo School, and lies south and west of Box Elk Creek. The creek, about a half mile away, is apparently not been contaminated, said McNitt. "Because the dumps are below the level of surface run-off, that has not been a problem," said McNitt. "Shallow wells, 40 to 50 feet deep, are the biggest problem."

Of ten wells tested as part of the initial "baseline survey", seven showed EDB in varying amounts, according to McNitt. Additional testing of wells in the vicinity is planned as an added precaution, but results so far indicate only properties adjacent to the work center are affected, the agency's press release said.

The Forest Service doesn't yet know how long residents of the affected properties have been exposed to the chemical, said McNitt. "At this point we are assuming the worst, that they (the containers) may have been leaking from the time they were buried. We hope that's not the case, but there is no way to know for sure."

(See Nemo on next page)

Nemo (Continued from previous page)

Police Chief Tracy Zaugg in January;

- heard request from Zaugg to get light fixed at park;
- authorized contacting Bennett Branch Busters for bid on tree trimming;
- heard that two dog complaints have been sent to magistrate court;
- referred playground equipment installation to Parks Commission;
- authorized handicap accessibility as part of Hale Hall sidewalk project.

The number of people who might have contacted EDB contamination from the dump is unknown as well, he said. "There are about 20 to 22 residents in Nemo, but the work center had seasonal employees. It's hard to say how many people might have been affected. If we have to contact anybody that ever drank from the wells, it could affect a lot of people."

Drinking EDB-contaminated water might not be the only problem, especially for wells with high levels of the chemical. "EDB can be absorbed through the skin," said McNitt. "There is a concern that continued contact might cause problems."

EDB mixed with diesel fuel was apparently sprayed on the lower trunks of trees during the 1970s, as part of an effort to control a serious infestation of mountain pine beetle in the Black Hills National Forest, said McNitt.

He was unsure exactly when the spraying program ended, but said the cans of chemical were probably buried at Nemo about 1975.

The Forest Service doesn't know of other EDB burial sites in the Black Hills, but hasn't ruled out the possibility, according to McNitt. Anyone with information about suspected chemical dump sites is asked to report the information to authorities, he said.

The chemical spray program was dropped sometime in the middle-to-late 1970s, because it was found not to be cost effective on a large scale, according to

McNitt. "Since (then) we have gone to treating stands. Silvicultural treatments (thinning etc.) cost less for more effect," he said. "A healthy tree can push the bark beetle right out."

Methods for handling the existing contamination are still under evaluation, said McNitt. Methods may exist to clean up contaminated soils on the spot, or the material might have to be incinerated or taken to a hazardous waste dump elsewhere, he said.

The options for providing pure water to affected Nemo residents are also being examined. "It could be as simple as putting on a filter," said McNitt. "We may decide to drill the wells deeper, to get out of the contamination, or we might drill a central well and hook up the residents."

A Wednesday evening meeting at Nemo will help determine what action is taken, he said. "We are finding out our options, and meeting with residents to find out what they are comfortable with."

Taking care of Nemo residents is the federal agency's number one goal at present, McNitt said. "Number two is to protect the environment and get it cleaned up."

Forest Service officials and an Environmental Protection Agency toxicologist and Forest Service officials will attend Wednesday's meeting, scheduled to begin at 6:30 p.m. at the Nemo Fire Hall, to answer resident's questions and concerns.

the Super 8 Motel to put up a 50-foot high sign. City ordinance allows only a 35-foot high sign.

Approved the first reading of Ordinance #13 amending the parking requirements for Group Care Homes/Assisted Living Facilities. The new ordinance would require one parking space per three residents, one handicapped parking spot plus one parking spot for each employee.

Glenn M.