

DEQ proposes approval of cleanup at Sublimity site

Underground tanks were put in place before waste regulations

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SUBLIMITY — The Department of Environmental Quality (DEQ) is seeking approval of the cleanup of a petroleum-contaminated site for 102 S. Center Street.

Historically, the site was used to dispense gasoline but has more recently played host to commercial office space.

“The [underground] tanks were installed before service regulations were enacted,” said DEQ representative Jim Glass. “So we can’t be sure when they were used. We think around the ’50s or ’60s, though.”

“They were pretty small tanks, holding about 2,000 gallons each,” Glass said. “So the site most likely was not a large gas station.”

According to a news release, UST Environmental Services, Inc. first discovered petroleum contamination after removing the two steel underground storage tanks during the installation of an exploratory trench in January 1992. As a result, about 120 cubic yards of contaminated soil was removed, aerated on site, and then taken to Brown Island Landfill in Salem. The aeration took approximately 6 months.

“Oxygen helps microbes in the soil break down gasoline,” said geologist Tim O’Gara. “Biodegrading is pretty fast that way.”

“The leak was most likely caused by corrosion, which is common after 15 or 20 years,” Glass said. “The tanks were made of steel. New tanks have protective fiberglass coatings or an impressed current corrosion system to help prevent corrosion. Since December 1998, it’s also been regulation for tanks to have spill and overflow protection and secondary containment on piping to prevent leaks.”

Two years later, in 1994, DEQ confirmed that, at the site, the petroleum had also contaminated shallow groundwater, despite the fact that CJE Consultants installed groundwater-monitoring wells following the 1992 soil-pollution excavation.

“I was told that there was no contamination at the last inspection,” said former mayor and the site’s current responsible party Doug Denson.

“So I stopped paying for it to be done,” Denson said. “I spent a sizeable amount of money on it.”

Finally, in 2006, self-employed O’Gara performed a comprehensive assessment, in which Denson completed an investigation to determine the extent of the remaining contamination and evaluated the potential exposure concerns, according to the release.

“DEQ has a risk-based standard that looks to see if it’s a risk to anyone, if it’s in the drinking water or if it’s in the trenches where people work,” said O’Gara. “I found that everything on site had already degraded to the point where it was no longer a risk.”

There are no wells within a 1-mile radius of the contamination, which extends no more than 5 or 10 feet, O’Gara said. Also, irrigation wells closest to the site are between 200 and 300 feet deep, much farther into the ground than the 15-foot-deep contamination.

“The wells on the south are perfect,” Denson said. “If there were a hazard, I would be concerned. I have no problem now. I just want this to get closed and done.”

Glass agrees with Denson.

“The area is mostly commercial,” Glass said, “but there are residential areas to the east. The contamination runs beneath the water and sewer trenches, so this doesn’t pose a health risk unless people make shallow groundwater wells or use the water for irrigation or consumption.”

The current closure plan will allow the remaining contamination in the soil and groundwater to naturally biodegrade.

“In the ground, it will take tens of years for the contamination to biodegrade,” Glass said. “If it’s dug up and aerated, it will be a matter of months.”

Concerned residents or citizens are encouraged to contact Glass in the DEQ Salem office at (503) 378-8240, ext. 249.

“We’re expecting people to contact us,” said Glass, “to see what’s going on and to offer their local knowledge. Sometimes they know things that we don’t.”

Written comments about the cleanup plan must be received at the Salem office, 750 Front St. N.E., Suite 120, Salem, OR 97310, by 5 p.m. June 6.

“I never would put this town in jeopardy,” concluded Denson. “I won’t do something that is harmful, and I’ve been assured that this is not.”