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Yakima Health District presents Rocky Top residents with evacuation plan in case of a chemical leak at DTG

SANTIAGO OCHOA Yakima Herald-Republic

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The landfill at Rocky Top can be seen from a trail on Saturday, Aug. 13, 2022, in Yakima, Wash.

Evan Abell, Yakima Herald-Republic file

The Yakima Health District presented neighbors of DTG Recycle's landfill near Rocky Top with an emergency evacuation plan Thursday should firefighting efforts at the landfill go awry and release hazardous chemicals into the air.

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In 2022, sampling conducted by the state Department of Ecology detected hazardous chemicals leaking out of the landfill and into the air. This led Ecology to give the site a Model Toxics Control Act designation, which would allow for decontamination efforts to start in the area. During follow-up testing in March, Ecology and the health district discovered an underground fire inside a closed cell in the landfill.

On top of monitoring the fire, the health district continues to test for benzene, hydrogen sulfide and carbon monoxide in the air near the landfill. Daily tests over the last few months have not detected hazardous levels of the three chemicals. Groundwater tests in the area have also shown no signs of contamination.

During an informational meeting Thursday for residents living near Rocky Top, the health district explained the method being used to put out the fire.

Representatives from the health district, Ecology and Yakima Valley Emergency Management also presented an emergency evacuation plan for residents.

With guidance from two landfill fire consultants, one hired by DTG and the other by the health district, officials adopted a soil cover grading plan to put out the fire. A 3-foot-thick layer of soil is being placed over the affected area to limit the amount of oxygen entering the landfill and feeding the fire.

Andy Wilson, the health district's emergency response coordinator, said there is no estimate for when the fire will be extinguished.

Variables like the size of the fire and the materials inside the landfill vary greatly between landfill fires so making an estimate is hard, said Ryan Ibach, the health district's chief operating officer.

Most likely, the fire will take months, if not longer, to be completely put out.

Health district officials said other methods of extinguishing the fire posed too great a risk to area residents, workers putting out the fire, and the environment.

They said trying to excavate the landfill could fan the fire by exposing it to the open air — at the same time, increasing the risk of hazardous chemicals leaking into the air in greater volume. Since the pit is unlined, using water to put out the fire would result in the water passing through the waste inside the cell and soaking into the ground below it.

Health district officials said daily testing at the site will continue.

Officials decided on a three-level evacuation plan. Should a mass release of hazardous chemicals occur, residents living within a three-quarter-mile radius of the landfill would be evacuated first. If the plume of chemicals reached farther out, residents living within a one-mile radius would evacuate next, followed by residents living within one-and-a-half miles.

Upon detecting dangerous levels of chemicals in the air, affected residents would receive an evacuation notice on their phones through Alert Yakima. If they have nowhere to stay, DTG would provide free lodging at a hotel in Yakima. Residents would also receive \$69 daily for food.

Residents with livestock were instructed to reach out to Yakima Valley Emergency Management in case of an evacuation. The organization has a team of volunteers ready to evacuate livestock and an agreement with the Yakima County Fairgrounds to house the animals.

The health district recently denied DTG's operation permit for its limited-purpose landfill along with Caton Landfill near Naches after citing environmental concerns.

Residents living near Rocky Top can sign up to receive emergency notifications by visiting yakimacounty.us/alertyakima. The health district will continue providing routine updates on ~~the DTG landfill on its website.~~

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