

# Oil-soaked soil and its cleanup worry Carson residents

**Sandy Mazza, Torrance Daily Breeze, 7-4-10**

Bill Dehart talked about the pools of aging oil in the ground under his neighborhood as he swept dried Elm tree leaves recently on the street outside his Carson home.

The beginning of a massive cleanup of the Carousel tract was outlined last week in a tentative government order to polluter Shell Oil.

Like hundreds of other residents in this community north of Lomita Boulevard, between Marbella and Panama avenues, Dehart got the order in the mail from his attorneys in their class-action lawsuit against Shell.

But he still can't imagine how it will be possible to clean gobs of oil-drenched soil and groundwater without first leveling homes, streets and driveways.

"How are they gonna get out all that oil?" Dehart wondered. "I don't particularly trust them."

The environmental remediation consists of cleaning a top layer of soil across the 50-acre site, and taking out buried concrete oil reservoir pieces, the report says.

"We're looking at removing the top 10 feet of soil across the entire property, but all areas of the property may not need to be removed," said Sam Unger, Los Angeles Regional Water Quality Control Board interim executive officer.

The water board is in charge of overseeing the cleanup by Shell, which has until Sept. 15 to submit a work plan for approval. Both agencies have said that the health risk is not bad enough to permanently relocate residents - a point some neighbors dispute.

Jim Carlisle, a toxicologist with the Office of Environmental Health Hazard Assessment, said there is a small increase in the risk of cancer to those exposed to the contaminated soil over many years. The increased risk is estimated at 90 in 1 million.

"We're talking about a one-in-a-million chance over 30 years," Carlisle said. "It's like if you buy a lottery ticket - it's unlikely that you'll win but there's a chance."

"When we say it exceeds safe levels it doesn't necessarily mean it's dangerous. It just means we can't definitively say it's safe. We don't think there's an imminent hazard but we do want to clean it up because of the long-term threat."

But the full story is still unknown because only soil and vapors in one-third of the neighborhood's lots have been tested so far.

"Quite a few properties have no contamination," Shell spokesman Dave McKinney said. "The key to this is testing all the properties."

Once testing is complete, another cleanup order will likely be issued, Unger said.

Attorneys from Girardi & Keese, the firm representing residents, are afraid that the contamination is too widespread to be fixed and said the cleanup order is vague.

"The order is a little confusing because the whole (Carousel tract) is cement," said firm attorney Tom Girardi. "Some of the cement is maybe even holding back some of the discharge of the oil. The only way you can adhere to the order is to tear everything down and go down about 30 feet and take up all the contaminated soil."

The current problems stem from a Shell Oil tank farm that stored crude oil in reservoirs on the site from 1924 to 1966. The 285 single-family homes were constructed there by Lomita Development Co. in 1967.

The oil tanks left unknown amounts of hydrocarbons such as benzene and methane clinging to the soil under the neighborhood's neat rectangular lots. But the chemicals weren't a concern when the property was sold because government environmental protections had not yet been implemented.

As the area was settled and couples moved in to raise families in the Los Angeles-adjacent community, the property's oily history was forgotten.

Some residents suspected problems lurking underground, though. Charles Long, a consultant and business owner who moved into the neighborhood 21 years ago, said he wondered why he easily grew a tree on one side of his garage but couldn't grow anything in dirt on the other side.

"I thought someone emptied chemicals there or something," Long said. "I find it outrageous that there was this much contamination and they were allowed to build here."

Shell employees discovered hydrocarbons in the soil of a nearby property about two years ago and looked up the area's history. They learned about the former oil tank farm that preceded the neighborhood and decided to test the soil there to see if residue remained. Dangerous hydrocarbons were found, and more tests were ordered last summer.

Initial tests revealed very slight health risks to residents, but the danger fueled residents' fears and led to the current class-action suit against Shell Oil.

Testing ground to a halt as the lawsuit was filed last year, with attorneys haggling over how tests should be conducted. Finally, in April, testing resumed under an agreement that each side - Shell and resident attorneys Girardi & Keese - would conduct its own tests.

Since then, there has been swift movement toward cleaning up the problematic site, culminating in the tentative cleanup order.

But many Carousel tract residents are not comforted by the progress.

Dehart said that, even if all the oil disappears tomorrow, the value of his home won't recover any time soon.

"With all the publicity, it will take a long time before people have trust in coming here," Dehart said. "But if they can control the contamination, I want to stay. I have great neighbors."