

A Haunting Past: How Gainesville is facing decades of toxic pollution

Mar 23, 2010 By Henry Taksier



Tia Ma, a local massage therapist, no longer feels comfortable treating clients at her house, eating herbs from her organic garden or letting her cat roll around in the soil. When she moved into her home at 708 NW 31st Ave. two years ago, she didn't realize the dangerous consequences of living there.

"I've noticed more and more animals with tumors in this neighborhood," she said. "To hear that three doors down the street, people are dying of cancer and houses are going out for sale – my heart has been broken."

Slowly, Ma learned about a nearby place called the Cabot/Koppers Superfund Site.

For 93 years, Koppers Inc. operated a 90-acre industrial facility at 200 NW 23rd Ave. The area is now ranked as one of the nation's top-100 polluted sites. In 1983, it was declared by the Environmental Protection Agency to be a Superfund site – a place so heavily polluted with toxic waste that it poses a threat to human health and the environment.

For decades, Koppers released industrial toxins into Gainesville's air, water and soil, including arsenic, hexavalent chromium, creosote and dioxins. Combined, these chemicals can cause cancer, rare diseases, changes in DNA, and birth defects.



There's a 500-foot buffer around the site, including ABC Liquor, Ward's Supermarket, the Salvation Army, a daycare center and dozens of homes, which the City of Gainesville designated an "area of special environmental concern" in 2005.

Cheryl Krauth is an officer of [Protect Gainesville Citizens Inc.](#), an organization dedicated to spreading awareness of the issue. She said the EPA is currently doing too little too slowly to help the residents who live near the site.

"We know there are homes along the border of the site – roughly 20 of them – who received letters from the [Alachua County] health department saying, 'Don't allow your children to play in the dirt; don't grow gardens in your yard; and stop using your wells,'" she said.

The letters also included other warnings, such as, "Do NOT get soil in your mouth, bathe upon reentering the house, and keep a separate set of 'play clothes.'"

Cindy Harrington, a resident of the Stephen Foster Neighborhood, has been working with Protect Gainesville Citizens for years to help her neighbors. Nonetheless, she secretly hoped her own home would be safe, as it was located across Northwest Sixth Street, outside the buffer area. Slightly over a month ago, a private environmental consulting firm tested nine homes, including hers, revealing evidence of high dioxin levels.

"If you feel your health is at risk and you want to leave, nobody wants to buy your house," Krauth said. "So there are lots of residents that feel trapped."

Joe Prager, founder of a local organization called Ban CCA, has personally experienced the damaging effects of industrial toxins. His daughter was born with a cleft lip and a cleft pallet despite his wife's efforts to stay perfectly healthy during her pregnancy. He later learned that the defects stemmed from his wife's exposure to [CCA-treated wood products](#), which contain a dangerous mixture of copper, arsenic and hexavalent chromium.

Prager's personal tragedy led him to years of research. From 2005 to 2008, Prager served on the Alachua County Environmental Protection Advisory Committee and decided to investigate Koppers.

He asked for reports from the Florida Department of Environmental Protection and found that the water run-off from Koppers contained arsenic levels that were eight times higher than what was acceptable near a residential area. Copper levels were 18 times higher. There was one patch of land in which the dioxin levels were 24,377 times higher than the accepted residential standard.

"There have been reports of cancer clusters, large numbers of pet deaths from cancer, [and] more than one case of multiple sclerosis nearby," Prager said.

In 1988, Koppers sold their property to Beazer East, a private developer who is currently responsible for working with the EPA to clean up and redevelop the area. Despite the property's Superfund status, Koppers still operated the lumber-treatment facility and continued their toxic operations until 2009. That's when Koppers decided to leave Gainesville, after all the investigations and bad publicity. Now that the operations are closed, the EPA has a chance to finally do its job.

"The EPA has done little or nothing for 26 years," Prager said. "They appear to have a cozy relationship with industry as a rule."

If the EPA doesn't move faster, there could be permanent consequences. There are spots on the Superfund site where creosote oils – highly carcinogenic toxins – have leached through layers of rock and soil toward Florida's aquifer system 200 feet below. From there, the pollutants could potentially flow north into the Murphree Wellfield, where Gainesville Regional Utilities draws the water supply for Gainesville and other surrounding communities.

"I've called this site the greatest environmental issue for Alachua County, and I still think that's true," Prager said. "Our drinking water is at stake here."

How can we, as a community, hold Beazer and the EPA accountable? Groups like the Stephen Foster Neighborhood Association, Ban CCA, Protect Gainesville Citizens and Gainesville United Neighborhoods have been working hard to spread awareness of the issue and encourage community activism.

"The EPA says they've done almost 10 years of studies," said Ma, who is now involved with Protect Gainesville Citizens. "We have no idea what those studies are. I want a compilation of all the tests that have been done so we can make decisions together. I don't want to create bad guys. I just want honesty."

Local activists are calling out to concerned residents, including UF students and professors, to educate themselves on the issue and to contribute whatever skills they might have. This includes a call for artists, photographers, journalists, urban planners, engineers and just about anyone else.

“I think the city of Gainesville and UF can really come together with some creative ideas,” Ma said. “I think it can be an amazing win-win. We should just admit that we’ve fucked up. And we can utilize the resources we have in this town. We can do our best to clean it up and do so publically and teach others how to do it so this never happens again. It’s not OK to just sit back and let the company decide how to make money on their 90 acres after they clean it up.”

Ma’s lease on the house will expire in July. She plans to permanently leave before then. Ma is a healer, and her beliefs include leaving places in a better condition than how she found them. Her goal is to fill the entire meadow around her house with ferns and sunflowers, known for their ability to heal the earth by absorbing industrial toxins.

Update: A lot has happened since this story was written. New tests have been done and the results are disconcerting, to say the least. For testimony from a troubled family living next door to the site, as well as responses from GRU, Beazer, the EPA, and GDEP, check out

A Haunting Past, Pt. II

Jun 14, 2010 By Henry Taksier



Neighborhood Contamination

When Mary Ann Jones bought her house in Northwest Gainesville, the real estate agent said there might be noise every now and then, due to the nearby industrial facility. She was okay with that. She was not warned that her grandchildren could be exposed to a dangerous concentration of dioxins, which are known to cause cancer and a wide range of health problems, especially in small children.

“I felt like this man signed me a death sentence,” she said.

For slightly over a year, Jones has lived at 3118 NW 4th St. with her extended family, which includes three grandchildren. The top of her fence is wrapped in barbed wire, which separates her backyard from the 90-acre Superfund site previously owned by Koppers, Inc. She wants to move away but doesn’t have the financial means.

For 93 years, Koppers, Inc. operated a wood-treatment facility at 200 NW 23rd Ave, releasing industrial toxins — including arsenic, hexavalent chromium, creosote and dioxins — into Gainesville’s air, water and soil. The area is now ranked as one of the nation’s top-100 polluted

sites. It has been designated a Superfund site — a place so heavily polluted with toxic waste that it poses a threat to human health and the environment — for 27 years.

“I’m scared to death,” she said. “I like to garden, but now my plants are dead because I’m scared to touch them. We’re pretty much stuck here.”

Her two youngest grandchildren – Carlos, 6, and Aaron, 3 – play outside every day without understanding the situation.

“We’re always telling them – if you drop anything on the ground, don’t pick it up and definitely don’t put it in your mouth. And always wash your hands when you come inside.”

Jones said she feels like no one has been there for her – not the local or state government, and certainly not the EPA. Her front yard is peppered with signs, which say things like, “Governor Crist – Where Are You?” and “Gainesville’s Dirty Little Secret is Out!”

The site is currently managed by Beazer East, the company responsible for cleaning up the site. According to disclosure forms filed with the Securities and Exchange Commission, Beazer was previously known as Koppers Company, Inc., and has an agreement to absorb environmental liabilities from the current incarnation of Koppers.



Legal battles over contamination have followed the companies around the country. Koppers currently faces lawsuits in Texas and Mississippi, though many of the claims have been dismissed. In its latest annual report, Koppers warned investors that, “Litigation against us could be costly and time-consuming to defend, and due to the nature of our business and products, we may be liable for damages arising out of our acts or omissions.”

Years of Uncertainty: Chris Bird of the Alachua County Department of Environmental Protection said the fact that Koppers was allowed to operate its facility for so long, despite the property’s Superfund status, has hindered the clean-up process.

“You can’t make a bed while someone is still sleeping in it,” he said.

Mitchell Brouman, a representative from Beazer East, said there are many reasons the process has taken so long, from Gainesville’s unique geology to discrepancies between state and federal regulations. He acknowledged, however, that the continued operation of the Koppers facility was one of them, “to some degree.”

Local activist groups, including Protect Gainesville Citizens, Ban CCA, and the Stephen Foster Neighborhood Protection Group, have documented a variety of health complications among

people who live near the site, from cancer to skin problems. They also contend that an unusually high number of dogs and cats near the site have malignant tumors.

Tests performed by the city and state health departments indicate hazardous dioxin levels in an easement between NW 26 St and NW 30 Ave, which serves as a buffer between Koppers and nearby neighborhoods. In 2009, the Alachua County Health department issued a press release warning parents not to let their children play in the easement.

The press release also states, “Incidental ingestion (swallowing) of very small amounts of surface soil in the neighborhood north and west of Koppers is not likely to cause harm.”

Scott Miller, the EPA’s regional project manager, said evidence of cancer in the neighborhood residents has been “anecdotal” and that the EPA “has not observed that effect.”

“The Florida Department of Health is doing a study of cancers in the area,” Miller said. “They will probably be making a response to that specific question with respect to folks living there as well as animals.”

Local residents say they have waited too long for answers. Protect Gainesville Citizens has received an EPA grant to hire technical advisers, but the grants cannot be used to pay for additional testing. Advisers can only help community groups make sense of existing reports.

“We need more data,” said Cheryll Krauth, one of the group’s officers. “There are reports of health problems, and we don’t know if they’re worse than the average neighborhood or not. The problem is that the entities responsible for testing aren’t telling us.”

For decades, the Stephen Foster Neighborhood Protection Group has not trusted the state, Beazer or the EPA. Last year, they sought help from the Law Offices of Robert H. Weiss, a firm that specializes in environmental justice.

In January, Xenobiotic Laboratories, Inc., an environmental consulting firm hired by the legal team, tested fine dust particles from inside nine randomly selected houses within a two-mile radius of the Superfund site.

“This is unique,” said Stephen Murakami, a Weiss attorney. “Indoor tests are rarely performed [by government agencies]. Outdoor soil testing is their standard, as opposed to indoor tests where it counts – where people live, breathe, and make their beds.”

The state has determined that the maximum dioxin concentration for soil outside to be safe is seven parts per trillion. Inside the nine houses tested, the average dioxin concentration was 400 parts per trillion. In one house, they were as high as 1.2 parts per billion.

While toxins can dissipate in the environment, they can accumulate indoors. Murakami said that while outdoor levels may take this into consideration, he believes the results reveal a substantial risk to human health, and called for additional testing. The test results have not yet been made public.

According to the World Health Organization, long-term dioxin exposure is linked to impairment of the immune system, the nervous system, the endocrine system, and reproductive functions. Chronic exposure may lead to several types of cancer. Small children face the greatest risks.

Mary Ann Jones was recently informed of the tests by Stephen Foster residents. She's left to wonder whether her family's ailments, from skin rashes to nosebleeds, are mere coincidences, or signs of toxic contamination. The uncertainty fuels her fears.

"The more I think about it, the angrier I get," Jones said. "You can't put no price on my life or my family. Why would you try to cover up something that you know is so deadly? Why do you think money is more important than the lives of my grandkids?"



(see illustration).

Water Contamination

The Superfund site is dotted with retention lagoons – unprotected pits where toxic waste is stored, a legacy of lax environmental regulations before the 1970s.

Local agencies had warned that creosote and other compounds could reach the Floridan Aquifer, 200 feet below the surface. The EPA contended until 2001 that the underground Hawthorne clay layer would provide a protective seal

"We and some citizens had been telling them we didn't believe that – you haven't done the right investigations to know what's happening that deep under the site," said Rick Hutton, an engineer from Gainesville Regional Utilities.

After further investigations, experts from the EPA, Beazer, and Gainesville Regional Utilities all agree that the Floridan Aquifer is already contaminated. Now, chemicals are slowly moving towards the Murphree Wellfield, where Gainesville Regional Utilities draws the city's drinking water supply.

"We have wells in between our site and the Murphree Well Field," said Mitchell Brouman of Beazer East. "Those monitoring wells are consistently clean. The protection of Gainesville's water supply is one of the premises of our work."

Hutton said Beazer will probably need to dig more wells to contain "hot spots" of underground pollution, and pump groundwater out of the aquifer at a faster rate to ensure it can be treated at the surface before contaminants reach the water supply.

“We don’t think the low-rate pumping will work,” said Hutton. “The EPA wants to give it a chance. If it doesn’t work, we expect them to take further steps.”

What can we do?

Groups of concerned citizens, including the Stephen Foster Neighborhood Association, Ban CCA, Protect Gainesville Citizens and the Stephen Foster Neighborhood Protection Group, have been working for decades to spread awareness of the issue and encourage community activism.

“Over 158 other sites have been closed since ours was declared a Superfund Site,” said Maria Parsons of the Gainesville Neighborhood Protection Group. “We’re still not cleaned up. Why? People coming together matters. You need to get active. Dig your heels in. Protest. Write letters. Make phone calls.”

Tia Ma, an officer of Protect Gainesville Citizens, has proposed the idea of using the property previously owned by Koppers to build an environmental research center, which would commemorate decades of anxiety and suffering, transforming them into a learning experience.

Brouman said Beazer East has “no problem” with that idea.

“There are going to be some public meetings where people can talk,” he said. “We’re all ears to those sorts of things.”

Update: On Feb. 2, the EPA issued its Record of Decision, a 703-page document detailing their plans to remedy the Superfund site. Have we reached the end of the road?

A Haunting Past, Pt. 3



The Record of Decision

The Stephen Foster neighborhood in northwest Gainesville is no ordinary stretch of suburbia. Just before night falls, sunlight passes through a canopy of leaves, illuminating the walls of not-so-perfectly aligned houses. Backyards reveal forests and creeks, invisible to those who drive by on the street.

There’s a sense of community here, rather than socially constructed conformity. The residents can’t be defined by any specific age, race, lifestyle or socioeconomic class. One thing they all have in common is that they’re directly affected by a dirty secret, which publicly emerges every decade or so to make local headlines.

At the core of the neighborhood, there's a 90-acre toxic wasteland, concealed by bushes and barbed-wire fences, known as the Cabot/Koppers Superfund site. "Superfund site" is a legal term used by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) to define areas polluted so severely that they pose an immediate threat to human health and local ecosystems.

Koppers Inc. operated a wood treatment facility in Gainesville since 1916, releasing a wide range of toxins into Gainesville's air, water and soil. They sold their property in 1988 to Beazer East, a private developer that follows Koppers around the country, absorbing environmental liabilities and allowing them to operate behind closed doors. The area was granted Superfund status 28 years ago.

Due to conflicts of interest between the EPA, Beazer East and neighborhood residents, the site has not been cleaned up yet. No one agrees on the extent of the pollution or what needs to be done about it. The EPA finally released their Record of Decision, which details their plans to clean the site, on Feb. 2.

Will the EPA's Record of Decision adequately address the needs of the community? Is their plan enough to heal the damage, grief and fear caused by almost a century of highly toxic pollution, or are they trying to cut corners and save money?

Local toxicology experts, such as Joe Prager and Patricia Cline, have expressed skepticism. They'll surely analyze the Record of Decision – all 703 pages of it – and look for answers between the lines. Public officials and environmental engineers are doing the same.

Prager contends that the EPA has a "cozy relationship with industry as a rule." The tax on corporate polluters that supplied the EPA's "Superfund" was eliminated by Congress in 1995. Now, the EPA has no choice but to rely on the cooperation of responsible parties like Beazer.

Prager served on the Alachua County Environmental Advisory Board from 2005 to 2008. His struggle with chemical treatment companies is a personal one. His wife was unknowingly exposed during her pregnancy to wood products treated with chromated copper arsenate (CCA). Soon after, their daughter was born with a cleft lip and a cleft palate.

Prager now spends his time researching the effects of industrial toxins and sifting through public documents. He works with Cline, the Stephen Foster neighborhood's technical advisor, to hold politicians and company representatives accountable for their actions.

Cline said on Feb. 3 that she wasn't ready to make any official comments on the Record of Decision. Based on what she's seen so far, she's glad the EPA is planning to remedy off-site soil contamination in accordance with state residential standards, which are more strict than national standards, despite resistance from Beazer East.

This may be a source of relief for Gainesville residents, especially families living near the site, who are often scared to let their kids play outside. What this means for residents is that Beazer East will hire contractors to remove two feet of contaminated soil from their yards via heavy

machinery and replace it with clean fill. Residents must agree to let the contractors onto their property.

The Record of Decision doesn't account for the concentration of dioxins inside people's houses, which can build up over time and surpass the levels outside. It certainly doesn't account for bioaccumulation, the process in which dioxins can bind to fatty tissue and accumulate in the human body.

Dioxin — one of the major pollutants released by Koppers — has historically been used in chemical weapons like Agent Orange. According to the World Health Organization, chronic exposure can lead to reproductive problems, immune damage and cancer.

In January 2010, a [private consulting firm](#) sampled fine dust particles from nine random houses within a two-mile radius of the Superfund site, revealing an average indoor dioxin concentration of 400 parts per trillion — over 50 times what the state considers to be safe for soil *outdoors*.

Mary Ann Jones lives in one of those houses with her extended family, which includes three grandchildren. The youngest ones — Aaron, 3, and Carlos, 6 — play outside each day without understanding the situation. She tells them to wash their hands after playing outside, and if they drop something on the ground, she tells them not to pick it up.

The Jones family's house, next door to the Superfund site, had an indoor dioxin concentration of 1.2 parts per *billion* — that's 150 times higher than Florida's outdoor residential standard.

Mary Ann was not warned of the pollution before she bought her property. She said she likes to garden, but now her plants are dead because she's scared to touch them. For the Jones family, moving away is not an option — they spent all their money on the house, and now their property is worthless.



“The more I think about it, the angrier I get,” Mary Ann said months ago. “You can't put no price on my life or my family. Why would you try to cover up something that you know is so deadly? Why do you think money is more important than the lives of my grandkids?”

Prager suggests relocation may be the safest solution for residents living near Koppers. Relocation is not considered in the EPA's Record of Decision, but they've done it before. In 1996, the EPA relocated 358 families in Pensacola, home

to the notorious Escambia Superfund site. The relocation was a result of additional soil testing, which only occurred due to overwhelming pressure from Citizens Against Toxic Exposure (CATE), a group similar to Protect Gainesville's Citizens.

The relocated families had been living under the shadow of what they referred to as “Mount Dioxin.” The EPA had decided to remedy the site by gathering an estimated 344,520 tons of contaminated soil and compressing it into 40 acres, resulting in a mound that was 60 feet tall. They protected the mound with a plastic seal, which was meant to last for ten years.

It only took a few years before wind and rain caused damage to the seal. Seeds got in the soil and trees began to emerge, wearing and tearing it further. Contaminated soil escaped and spread through the neighborhood. The story of Escambia is neatly spelled out in the second chapter of *Sacrifice Zones*, a work of investigative journalism by Steve Lerner.

The EPA’s Record of Decision calls for a similar approach in Gainesville, involving a mound of toxic soil, vertical walls and an engineered cap. Prager saw the parallelism in their proposed plan and sent an editorial to the Gainesville Sun, warning residents that Gainesville may soon be home to a new Mount Dioxin.

In their Record of Decision, the EPA analyzed Prager’s assertions and denied them. According to the ROD, “Many of the points raised by the commenter [Prager] related to the Escambia site are factually inaccurate. The HDPE temporary cover alluded to in the comment *performed as expected* and was replaced by an engineered cap.”

According to *Sacrifice Zones*, “Residents were first told the plastic cover would last for five years but the EPA subsequently claimed it had a ten-year lifespan. In 1996, the contractor who installed the cover reported to the EPA that it was damaged and had a two-foot hole and a two-foot tear in it along with other smaller holes.”

In a phone call, Francine Ishmael, executive director of CATE, directly testified: “It was a plastic tarp that they put on a mound of dirt. They said it would last for 10 years. It did not.”

In Gainesville, the EPA’s Record of Decision calls for an engineered cap, which they claim will have “an indefinite life expectancy with minimal maintenance.” Its dimensions and design are yet to be determined. Prager hopes, as many Gainesville residents do, that the EPA won’t repeat its mistakes in Gainesville.

Cline said the Record of Decision doesn’t explicitly spell out everything. It’s the role of concerned citizens, she says, to constantly make sure the EPA is up-to-date on relevant data and community input that they might otherwise overlook.

She expressed concern that the Record of Decision doesn’t adequately address the issue of contaminants leaching downward from the soil into the groundwater. There are many polluted areas, she said, where the EPA intends to scrape up contaminated soil and replace it without conducting further investigations on what’s underneath.

The true extent of pollution from Koppers may never be fully defined. It’s underground and above ground. It’s in the air, soil, groundwater, creeks and forests. Creosote threatens to permanently damage the Floridan aquifer. Dioxins are building up in yards and houses. The

Stephen Foster Neighborhood Protection Group claims that animals, pets and even people have died as a result of Koppers.

Scott Miller of the EPA dismissed their claims as “anecdotal.” The Florida Health Department concluded that yards in the Stephen Foster neighborhood were safe but warned residents not to let their kids play in a narrow easement bordering Koppers.

Any officer of Protect Gainesville’s Citizens, an organization that aims to spread awareness, would stress the idea that the Superfund process requires relentless grassroots involvement. Otherwise, residents living in the shadow of Superfund sites are likely to be overlooked.

For related stories, check out [A Haunting Past, Pt. 1](#), [A Haunting Past, Pt. 2](#), and [The Superfund Art Project](#).

To learn more and/or get involved, visit [Protect Gainesville’s Citizens](#).

Read the second chapter of Sacrifice Zones [here](#).

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