After 3 decades, birds still fall dead from sky in St. Louis

Keith Matheny  12:55 a.m. EDT August 3, 2014

ST. LOUIS – It’s startling to watch robins drop from the air, flop around and die, Jim Vyskocil said.

But the St. Louis resident has seen it multiple times.

“It’s like they are having a convulsion, and then they’re dead,” he said.

A few houses down, Michelle Van Horn said she has picked up at least a dozen dead robins and blackbirds from her backyard in the 18 years she has lived there. The most recent was just a couple of weeks ago, she said.

The cause is no mystery to the nearly 7,500 who live in this Gratiot County town — a toxic legacy of decades of pollution from the nearby former Velsicol Chemical Corp. site on the banks of the Pine River. Velsicol, and Michigan Chemical Corp. before it, made a variety of chemicals starting in the 1930s, including the insecticide DDT and polybrominated biphenyl, or PBB, a flame retardant.

A Michigan State University environmental toxicologist’s new study in St. Louis has helped quantify and magnify the concerns arising out of the residents’ dead-bird anecdotes.

Matt Zwiernik and volunteers last year collected 29 dead birds, including 22 robins, from a nine-block residential area near the now demolished plant — only a small portion of the dead birds they could have collected, Zwiernik said. The drive time from East Lansing to St. Louis often meant that by the time they could get to the scene, a cat or other animal already had made off with the bird. And they also couldn’t always get permission to go onto every property where the dead birds were seen.

The birds’ sudden death is from feeding on contaminated worms, grubs and insects, poisoned by the area’s tainted soils.

Forensic study of the bird carcasses showed alarming results: brain and liver abnormalities were found in 12 of the 29 birds. The mean total level of DDT or its breakdown components in the collected robins’ brains was 552 parts per million — some of the greatest concentrations ever recorded in wild birds, Zwiernik said. Thirty parts per million of DDT are known to cause death in many bird species.

“The local residents, they are not surprised; they know what’s going on. They’ve seen it for 20 years,” he said. “I think it’s the rest of the world that’s shocked that there’s a situation in this day and age where a larger portion of the city has such contamination that birds are falling from the sky.”

But that’s only part of the problem: Velsicol signed off on a consent agreement with the state and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in the early 1980s as it went bankrupt that left only about $20 million for cleanup.

Yet the true cost of the remediation will be nearly half-a-billion dollars, officials estimate. And that cost will be borne by taxpayers.

Contaminated soil

What many residents now see in their yards are backhoes, dump trucks and men in hard hats. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, over the next two years, is removing contaminated soil from nearly 100 residential yards in that nine-block area adjacent to the now shuttered Velsicol site — now an EPA Superfund site. Some 150 trees also are being removed from parkways, the strip of land between the street and the sidewalk, in the neighborhood.

The depth of soil removed — from 6 inches up to 4 feet — is based on testing, and designed to remove the contamination causing an ecological or human health risk, said Thomas Alcamo, the EPA project manager in St. Louis.

Contaminated soil is trucked to the now vacant Velsicol site, and accumulated for trucking to approved landfills, he said. Clean backfill and topsoil then are used to replace the excavated materials, and landscaping is then restored and new sod laid.
The EPA, which started the process in late June, hopes to complete 60 yard excavations by fall, then another 37 yards next summer, Alcamo said. About 30,000 tons of contaminated soils will be excavated this summer, he said.

Resident Jerry Randolph was the first to have his yard excavated earlier this month. The sod covering his yard was clearly still in square segments, but was green and lush.

“They’ve done a really good job on the yard. I like it,” he said. “They put stuff back where it was supposed to be.”

About a block away, resident Dana Skinner questioned the earth-moving activity happening on all sides of his home.

“All this for a few dead birds ... it seems like it could be a waste of money,” he said.

Money for cleanup

Velsicol closed the plant in 1977, four years after accidentally mixing thousands of pounds of PBB-laced fire retardant into livestock feed. The illnesses that ensued in farm animals led to the contamination of food stocks throughout the upper Midwest. More than 500 contaminated Michigan farms were quarantined, and approximately 30,000 cattle, 4,500 swine, 1,500 sheep and 1.5 million chickens were destroyed.

Health effects on humans have been detected, including increased breast cancer risk but are still not fully understood more than four decades later.

Drop in the bucket

As Velsicol went bankrupt, its consent agreement with the EPA and the state in 1982 left only about $15 million to $20 million for use in the cleanup — a relative drop in the contaminated bucket.

Taxpayers, through the Superfund, now are funding the cleanup. And the bill has been, and will be, massive. A cleanup of Pine River sediments from 1998 to 2006 cost more than $100 million.

The residential cleanup is estimated at $12 million through next year. And the EPA has agreed to replace the city’s drinking water supply, with the new well field estimated to cost $45 million. That project should be complete in 2016, EPA officials said.

“It’s just cheaper to give them a new well field as part of the pump-and-treat system they will have to operate,” Alcamo said.

High price tag

But still looming on the horizon is a cleanup of the factory site itself. And many materials were buried on the 54-acre site.

Richard Karl, the director of the Superfund division for the EPA’s Region 5, which includes Michigan, said design work is not complete on that cleanup, but it’s thought it could cost more than $300 million.

“With a price tag that high, we have to go before a panel that prioritizes nationally what the worst sites are to get funding first,” he said.

While residents are dismayed at the loss of so many large trees in front of their homes, most generally support the cleanup efforts underway, resident Sherida Burch said as her grandchildren played on the lawn and earth-movers beeped and scooped dirt at a house across the street.

“We want to clean up St. Louis for our families,” she said.

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