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EPA Begins Cleanup of Contaminated Soil at Residential Properties in Anapra, N.M.

Work Will Remove Lead and Arsenic in Soil from Asarco Inc. Pollution

(Santa Fe, NM) – Asarco Inc. began a cleanup of lead and arsenic contaminated soil at several properties in Anapra, N.M. The work is being conducted under the oversight of EPA, which agreed to do the work after NMED requested it.

The soil became contaminated as a result of the operation of the mill at the Asarco Copper Smelter in El Paso, which closed in 1999. NMED and the State of New Mexico have vigorously opposed the granting of a permit by the Texas Commission on Environmental Quality that would allow the facility to reopen.

“Some residents in the Anapra and southern New Mexico region have been exposed to negative effects from pollution at the smelter,” said New Mexico Environment Department Secretary Ron Curry. “The soil clean up will protect citizens from exposure to high levels of lead and arsenic, which could lead to health problems including brain and nervous system damage. Children are particularly vulnerable to ill effects from lead and arsenic poisoning.”

NMED requested that the contaminated soil be disposed of at an El Paso landfill instead of at Camino Real Landfill because of concerns from the community. The project, which will be paid for by Asarco from money it owes the EPA, will cost about \$200,000.

The work, which is expected to be completed by the end of August, involves removing up to two feet of contaminated soils from yards. The yards are then backfilled with clean soils and landscaped. The work in Anapra is part of a bigger cleanup project of lead and arsenic accumulation from the air pollution from the Asarco smelter. The project includes other areas in El Paso.

EPA cleaned up 830 properties in El Paso as of 2006 in order to protect the public health and the environment. EPA will continue the work on about 300 other properties — 24 in the Anapra and Sunland Park area.

Texas Sen. Eliot Shapleigh and the members of the El Paso Soils Workgroup raised awareness about the soil contamination in 2001. EPA, NMED, TCEQ and the City of El Paso worked on the issue and testing of soil commenced in high access public areas within a three-mile radius of the border of Texas and New Mexico. In addition, the New Mexico Department of Health (NMDOH) collected soil in residential area in 2005. NMED asked EPA to perform additional sampling in response to the NMDOH sampling results. Approximately 24 properties were identified for cleanup.

The Asarco plant in El Paso shut down in 1999 after the price of copper fell in the 1990s. Communities around the plant also face other air quality concerns, including elevated levels of airborne particulate matter and ground level ozone pollution.

NMED and the State of New Mexico have been vocal opponents of the reopening of the El Paso Asarco facility because of the air and other pollution it would create. The department's Air Quality Bureau first opposed the renewal of the permit for the facility in January 2005, when it requested that TCEQ determine whether more stringent emissions controls should be required if the facility is restarted. Secretary Curry submitted additional detailed comments on the proposed permit renewal in June. TCEQ subsequently issued a report responding to NMED's and other parties' comments. The report ultimately dismisses the comments and recommends the renewal of the Asarco permit. The department will review the TCEQ report and pursue additional actions to protect public health and the environment in Doña Ana County.

Asarco operates another copper smelter in Hayden, Arizona.

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