

# Indiana governor declares disaster in East Chicago over lead contamination

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In an executive order signed on February 9, Indiana Republican Governor Eric Holcomb declared a disaster for the USS Lead (U.S. Smelter and Lead) site in East Chicago, Indiana. As of last year, as many as 1,000 people were living on the site. The declaration is supposed to mark the beginning of cleanup of the site, which the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) designated as a Superfund site in 2009 due to dangerously high levels of lead in the soil.

Superfund is a US federal government program launched in 1980 after the corporate-made Love Canal disaster in New York state to fund the cleanup of sites contaminated with hazardous substances.

On Friday February 17, Holcomb and Lt. Governor Suzanne Crouch met with Democratic Mayor Anthony Copeland along with other city officials and advocacy groups in East Chicago to discuss the executive order. A press conference followed.

The disaster declaration was signed two months after the state's former governor, current US Vice President Mike Pence, had refused to sign a similar order. Copeland, with the support of Indiana state Democrats, requested the declaration from Pence along with an allocation of federal funding on December 1, 2016. Pence refused, stating that adequate state resources had already been spent on the issue.

The widespread publicity and outrage following the late 2015 exposure of the lead poisoning of Flint, Michigan water has caused a public awareness of lead poisoning throughout the country. The renewed focus on East Chicago and the USS Lead site is a direct result.

Governor Holcomb's recent declaration allocates an additional \$2 million for the demolition of the West Calumet Housing Complex, which sits squarely on one of the most contaminated areas of the site. Holcomb

has also set a 30-day timeline for the removal of the 100 or so residents who still remain in the complex. Mayor Copeland first ordered the nearly 1,000 residents out of the West Calumet complex in June 2016, after EPA tests revealed lead levels in the soil to be, in some cases, as much as 200 times greater than acceptable limits for residential areas.

The West Calumet complex is managed by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD). It has been slated for demolition. All of the residents of the complex qualify for government housing assistance, the majority of whom are children, and all are working class. Residents have been left to find new housing on their own after the initial orders were given by Copeland. They were issued Section 8 vouchers, which subsidize rent payments for low-income families, and a list of landlords that would take them. However, the list was outdated, and due to a lack of affordable housing and the other costs of moving that are not covered by the vouchers, residents had a difficult time finding housing and many were unable to move out.

The complex was built in 1975 on the site of USS Lead's closed Anaconda Lead Products facility, a smelter whose primary products were made of lead. It should have been obvious to officials to conduct lead tests of the soil before constructing the complex, but HUD went ahead with the project and completed the complex without conducting sufficient tests. The lead toxicity crisis entered the public eye in 1985, after the first EPA tests of the site were finally conducted, revealing higher than acceptable levels of lead in the soil in and around the site.

In 1975, and again in 1985, USS Lead received permits to dump waste into the Calumet Grand River, which flows nearby the site. Lead particles from the

smelter, which operated from 1906 to 1985, were also released into the air and soil by dust particles from the plant's flues. The soil around the area has also been contaminated by waste from battery acid leaked from old batteries used at the plant. The company was found to be in violation of its permits several times, but the only penalties that it faced were minimal fines. The most severe fine was a mere \$55,000 in 1991, in which the company was also ordered to place tarps over piles of lead dust left over from smelting.

West Calumet is located six miles south of Carrie Gosch Elementary School, which was constructed near the smelter in 1959. Children who have attended the school have been exposed to high levels of lead—between 1,000 and 1,400 ppm according to data released from tests conducted in 1997. These levels are well above the EPA's acceptable limit of 400 ppm for play areas.

In addition to USS Lead, the DuPont Chemical Company had manufacturing operations near the site of West Calumet and Carrie Gosch Elementary. The DuPont facility was located adjacent to the USS Lead facility, where it manufactured arsenate insecticide from 1910 to 1949. Waste product from its manufacture was released into the soil and the air. The company was also penalized with minimal fines for its part in the contamination.

Though the lead never contaminated the city's drinking water, which comes from Lake Michigan, elevated lead levels in the soil are dangerous and have produced health problems. Signs posted by the EPA in public areas read, "Do not play in or around the dirt and mulch," in both English and Spanish. There have been complaints of chronic headaches and mental health problems, such as Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder, from those living in the area.

The 2009 declaration of the area as a Superfund site came after the highest levels of soil lead were found in the yards in the West Calumet Housing Complex and surrounding areas. The area was first proposed as an EPA National Priority in 1992, but never made it to the list. Tests conducted in 1997 failed to find levels of lead in violation of EPA standards, but these tests were revealed to be flawed, as samples were taken from areas to the north that were located farthest away from the USS Lead smelter and DuPont facility.

The federal Superfund program was originally set up

as a repository of the fines levied on corporations for poisoning the environment to be used for the remediation of those areas by the EPA. Since its creation in 1980, the program has become a political football and many of the fines levied were never collected. Funding between 2001 and 2013 dropped by almost half and under the Obama Administration's EPA head Gina McCarthy, the number of cleanups fell to eight in 2014, from 20 in 2009.

Although the lead contamination has been known by officials and affected residents for several decades, no substantial efforts to clean up the area have been made until now. Governor Holcomb's recent declaration of the disaster emergency calls for the state legislature to push for more lead testing, promote development of new "affordable" rental housing, and to create a web site for state and local reports on the cleanup progress.

As part of the declaration, Holcomb proclaimed that the Indiana Department of Homeland Security is "empowered to obtain any services needed on an emergency basis from any level of government."

The decision has been lauded by Indiana State Democrats. Mayor Copeland himself worked with Holcomb to draw up the order, listing resources that would be needed by the state to carry it out. Representative Earl Harris and Senator Lonnie Randolph, both of East Chicago, have been enthusiastic about the executive order, and have stated that they will work to make many of its measures "permanent." Democratic Senator Joe Donnelly also hailed the order. In a statement after the order passed, Donnelly said, "I want to thank the Governor for recognizing the gravity and seriousness of the situation in East Chicago, and I look forward to combining state and federal resources to help the residents living in the neighborhoods impacted by the Superfund site."

For decades, both state Democrats and Republicans did little but slap the wrists of the companies that caused the lead contamination crisis, in order to protect the interests of the corporations.



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