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Radioactive dirt is trucked from Coldwater Creek. North County residents want broader testing.

Jesse Bogan Sep 7, 2023

FLORISSANT — The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and its contractors have removed 301 truckloads of radioactive dirt from the western bank of Coldwater Creek near Jana Elementary School since July, officials said.

The 2,510 cubic yards of soil, contaminated with World War II era waste from the development of atomic weapons, were hauled by dump truck to the Corps' intermodal site north of the airport at 110 James S. McDonnell Boulevard. From there, it's being shipped by train to US Ecology, a hazardous waste firm, in Idaho.

"We are doing the work," **Phillip Moser, program manager of the Corps' Formerly Utilized Sites Remedial Action Program in St. Louis**, said in an interview. "That doesn't mean people have to stop what they are doing and not live their regular lives."



The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers removes soil contaminated with radioactive waste from the banks of Coldwater Creek, bottom, that runs next to Jana Elementary School, top, in Florissant on Tuesday, Sept. 5, 2023. The school has been closed since last year when a private testing firm said it found elevated levels of radiation in the school. David Carson, Post-Dispatch

Some area residents said they were glad the contamination was being removed in that spot of the creek, but that the same obvious question remained that has dogged them for years: When will reliable testing be broadened throughout north St. Louis County?

Other area residents, including new arrivals, weren't sure what was happening behind the chain-link fence installed between Jana Elementary and the creek. The Corps publicly announced in May that the work was coming. There is signage and a new gravel road to access the remediation activity.

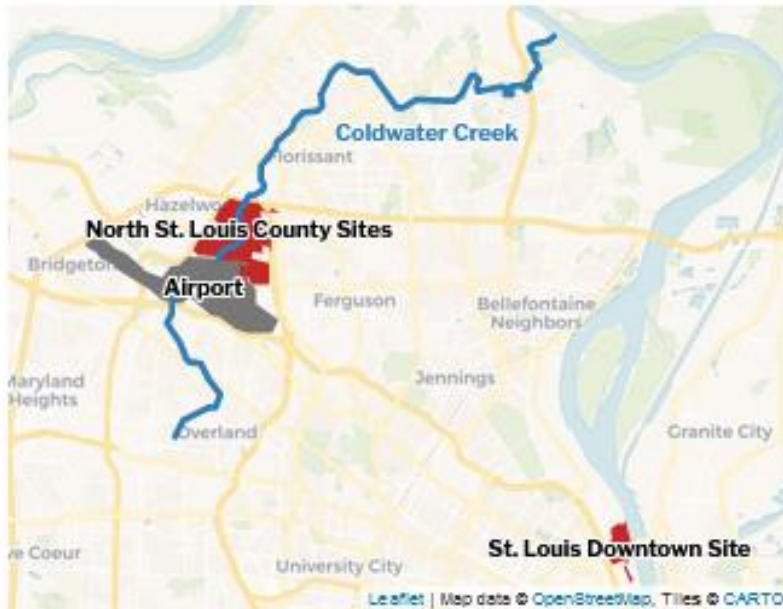
The school remains closed despite U.S. government assurances and testing in and around Jana following public outcry last year from an independent study.

Coldwater Creek contamination

Last updated: Dec. 17, 2021

Use the control below to learn more about contamination and remediation along Coldwater Creek.

Overview ▾



Graphic by Josh Renaud / St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Source: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Formerly Utilized Sites Remedial Action Program, Missouri Department of Natural Resources

Among its various cleanup projects in the St. Louis region, the Corps has been sampling 14 miles of Coldwater Creek between the airport and the confluence with the Missouri River. They are testing for radioactive contaminants within the 10-year floodplain. If elevated test results lead beyond that narrow scope, officials say they will widen sampling in those areas until the trail goes cold.

“There is nothing in the flood plain at Jana Elementary,” Moser said Thursday. “Never was. Never has been.”



Caleb Hansen, a radiation protection tech, tests a cloth he used to wipe down a dump truck carrying away soil contaminated with radioactive waste from the banks of Coldwater Creek near Jana Elementary School in Florissant on Tuesday, Sept. 5, 2023. David Carson, Post-Dispatch

The Corps has been focusing on testing so that a full remediation plan can be designed for Coldwater Creek. Dozens of areas will need to be remediated. Still, the Corps has already cleaned up a few spots along the creek, including parts of St. Cin Park in Hazelwood, some backyards along Palm Drive and a high bank of the creek bordering Duchesne Park in Florissant.

Moser said remediating the creek bank on the western side near Jana offers good training for what's ahead for the broader project.

"We had the thought of going and doing it before this all blew up," he said, referring to the public concern last school year about Jana.



Dawn Chapman of environmental advocacy group Just Moms STL confronts Col. Kevin Golinghorst, St. Louis District commander of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, following a Hazelwood School District board meeting where the Corps presented preliminary testing findings and declared Jana Elementary to be safe, on Wednesday, Nov. 9, 2022. Robert Cohen, Post-Dispatch

Along the creek bank, trees and bushes have been removed. Heavy equipment is used to excavate non-contaminated soil to reach the contaminated soil. A water truck sprays down a gravel road built near the school for access.

The work will continue in that spot until fall, Moser said. In 2024, McDonnell Boulevard will be shut down near the airport to remediate under the roadway and where a bridge is supposed to be replaced over Coldwater Creek.

“We have a lot of work ahead,” Moser said.

Remediation of the creek is supposed to be completed in **2038**.

What about the rest?

Residents are frustrated that much broader efforts aren’t being done to test homes for contamination throughout north St. Louis County, including by Coldwater Creek tributaries that have backed up and flooded low-lying yards in past decades. An extensive amount of topsoil was also taken out of Coldwater Creek bottomlands to level off and build new subdivisions in North County and other suburban areas. There used to be a sod farm at what is now Schaefer Bend County Park.

“I don’t care where you move, that creek is there,” said Bobbie Clay, 80, who, after nearly 50 years of living near the waterway, has grown disillusioned that real help is coming.

Jered Fox, 32, who rents a home immediately behind Jana Elementary in the 2700 block of Morris Drive, said he'd inquired about hiring a private company to test but he didn't have that kind of money.

"I'd like to have testing done to see if there is radioactivity in our yard," he said. "I don't want to get sick."

His neighbor, originally from the Philippines, has an extensive in-ground vegetable garden.

"I don't know if my garden is safe or not," said Arlane Zacarias, 39.



Jules Teasley, 82, says he wishes the government would test residential areas near Jana Elementary School in Florissant. Teasley joked on Tuesday, Sept. 5, 2023, that if there is any radioactive waste in his yard he hopes the moles that are digging holes in his rose garden will eat the radiation and die. David Carson, Post-Dispatch

Jules Teasley, 82, of the 400 block of Jana Drive, said contamination could have blown or been tracked around by foot. He often wonders, while watering his roses, if his yard has something lingering in it.

"I'd like to see testing all around here," he said.

“Anybody in this area would like to have testing done,” said Mike Green, 64.

His son, Matt Green, wanted reliable test results.

“The facts: Not contracted by an alphabet agency,” said Matt, 38, who attended Jana.

North County neighborhoods have changed a lot since then. Many of the original residents moved to St. Charles County and elsewhere. Andre Williams, 62, who just moved from north St. Louis into a nice home on Chapel View Drive near Jana Elementary, said he wasn’t aware of the environmental saga.

“I am going to do research on that now,” he said.

How to get it done

Missouri State Rep. Mark Matthiesen, R-O’Fallon, helped create the Radioactive Waste Investigation Fund in 2018 when he was formerly representing an area of the state that included West Lake Landfill. He said he wanted funding available so that local governments with legitimate concerns can apply to get testing done.

The measure passed but hasn’t been funded. Over the summer, gubernatorial candidate and House Minority Leader Crystal Quade, D-Springfield, called on Gov. Mike Parson, a Republican, to fund it.

“Governor Parson is concerned for the impacted communities, but this issue was caused by the federal government and should be fixed by the federal government,” a Parson spokesman said then.

Matthiesen disagrees with that strategy. He said money needs to be spent to determine the extent of the problem, “so we have actual evidence to hold our federal government accountable.”

He said individual residents likely won’t get far trying to get testing done on their own.

“Unless you are footing the bill yourself, you are going to have to work with some government agency to get them to do it,” he said. “I don’t know why the councilmen in Florissant, Missouri, are not 100 times louder on that exact issue. The squeaky wheel gets the testing.”

Florissant Mayor Timothy J. Lowery said he grew up playing in Coldwater Creek and also attended Jana Elementary. He said his family hasn’t been sickened by it, but the main question lingers.

“I just need to know, my community needs to know, is it safe,” he said. “It’s been going on a long time.”



A machine operator puts personal protective equipment on his feet before he enters the site where the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers are removing soil contaminated with radioactive waste from the banks of Coldwater Creek that runs next to Jana Elementary School on Tuesday, Sept. 5, 2023. David Carson, Post-Dispatch

Still, he said, no one has come to city meetings advocating for broader testing.

“If it’s going to make my community feel better, then obviously I want that,” he said.

Ward 4 Councilman Jeff Caputa, who represents the area around Jana Elementary, acknowledged in an interview that “it wouldn’t be a bad idea” to test areas of Coldwater Creek tributaries, but that the priority is on remediating hot spots within the 10-year floodplain of the main creek.

“As of right now, we are going by what the Corps is saying,” Caputa said.

Hazelwood School District officials didn’t have anything to say about plans for shuttered Jana Elementary, other than to stay off the property.

Late last week, school district workers used pickup trucks to haul out desks and chairs. Basketball rims and swings had already been removed from the playground, but at least one family from the broader community continued to play with their small children there.

They went past the main school sign that, like so many others, offered encouraging words out front: "Every challenge is an opportunity to grow."

By Tuesday, the whole sign had been removed, too.

Post-Dispatch reporter Blythe Bernhard contributed to this report.



The sign from in front of Jana Elementary School in Florissant was recently removed leaving only the footings and bolts on Tuesday, Sept. 5, 2023. The school has been closed since last year when a private testing firm said they found elevated levels of radiation in the school. David Carson, Post-Dispatch