NORTH YORKSHIRE FIRE & RESCUE SERVICE

SELBY DISTRICT COUNCIL

Environment Agency

North Yorkshire County Council

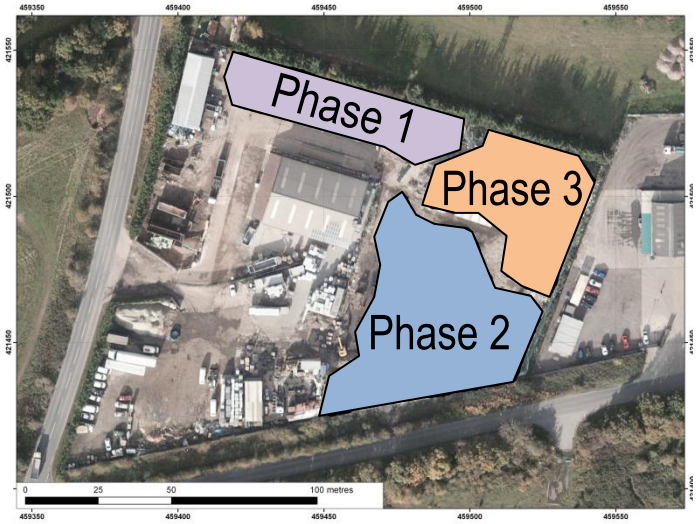
Public Health England

Edition 1 - Keeping you informed during works on site 20 November 2015

Great Heck Waste Site

Here's the latest update on work on the former Wagstaff's waste site at Great Heck. You can find out more online too:
www.emergencynorthyorks.gov.uk/greatheck

Work so far



We're now going into the second week of work on the Great Heck waste site, with progress on track.

Phase one of the work is coming to an end, which means that we can now start to clear the waste that is causing the most problems for people living and working in the Great Heck area.

Given the amount of waste on site, this is a complex job that will take time to resolve. During the past week, however, we have removed approximately 1300 tonnes of material from the site, in 53 lorry loads. This gives us enough space to start moving the main pile to cool it down, and take it off site (phase 2 in the map above). We were aware that initial movements had caused some mud on the roads. This has been cleared and we will monitor the state of the roads throughout the operation.

Phase 2

During phase 2 of work it is possible that the fire may flare up and there is an increase in odour as we access waste deep within the pile. The Fire Service will, of course, be on hand if required and the people carrying out the clearance work have measures in place to control any burning. Unfortunately this is a risk when moving the waste but we want to reassure you that we will continue to monitor the activities on site to minimise any impact.

Responding to your concerns

Many of you recently attended a 'drop-in' session at Great Heck church, during which we were able to tell you about the tactical plan for the site; gather information from you and to take your questions too. We hope you found this useful. From the feedback we've received, we know there are a number of key issues you want to know more about.

What is being monitored during the site clearance? What are you doing with the information?

As you know, the Environment Agency and Selby District Council arranged for ambient and daily air quality monitoring. Public Health England will be using the air quality monitoring data to help assess the public health risk to residents and

workers on-site and to inform the guidance provided to the public.

It's important to be aware that many of the pollutants found in the fire can arise from other sources – for example, vehicle emissions are a common source of air pollution.

Initial monitoring has focused on fine 'particulates'. Particulates (PM10) are indicative of the smoke plume and are also a good marker for other pollutants such as nitrous oxide and sulphur dioxide that arise from fires. Monitoring was carried out initially very close to the site, when concerns were raised in early October, and has since been carried out on Long Lane by the Environment Agency.

During the course of the site clearance, monitoring will be carried out at two sites – one in Great Heck itself and one to the north east of the site. These will monitor the effects on air quality of the site operations and will be analysed by PHE on a daily basis. This will be used to provide information back to the agencies clearing the site and to local residents. If the monitoring indicates that activities on the site are causing the air quality to deteriorate considerably then the multi agency group will liaise with the fire service and staff engaged in the clearance operation to review and alter activities as needed.

Information for residents will be communicated twice weekly each Monday and Friday afternoon via the website http://www.emergencynorthyorks.gov.uk/greatheck that will include weather forecasting of anticipated wind direction. This will tell you whether air quality is expected to be good enough to advise that normal daily activities will be possible (low impact on the surrounding area) or if our existing advice to close windows and doors and to minimise exposure to the smoke as much as possible should be followed (moderate impact.)

In addition to this daily monitoring, the levels of volatile, organic, compounds (VOCs) present will also be assessed. These types of chemicals are likely to be causing the strong odour. This will be included in data sent for analysis and toxicological interpretation at the end of the site clearance and to provide further reassurance to support the advice previously given about the long term health risks.

Although we will be getting particulate data from the new monitors on a daily basis, the VOC monitoring is carried out in a different way and needs to be sent away for testing. As the levels are likely to be very low (but are still detectable as a smell, as the human nose is very sensitive!). The VOC samples need to be collected over a longer term to give the best chance of getting usable results.

What will PHE mean by moderate and low impact in its twice-weekly updates?

Moderate impact from the site operations will mean that the smoke may be blowing towards people in the area nearby. Whilst this is unwelcome, our ongoing monitoring suggests that there will not be any significant public health impacts but we would still advise that you minimise any exposure, close doors and windows etc. Of course, if you do feel unwell, you should contact your GP or NHS 111 for advice, as you would under any other circumstances.
Low impact from site operations will mean that the weather conditions are such that people in the area are unlikely to be impacted by any emissions from the site. Residents and visitors should be unaffected by any emissions; if necessary you might wish to take the opportunity to ventilate your property to remove any remaining odours.

The twice weekly updates will start on Monday 23 November 2015.

What is in the smoke? Aren't there likely to be dioxins and carcinogens? How will you monitor our health to make sure there are no long-term problems?

Smoke consists of a mixture of gases, liquid droplets and solid particles, representing the decomposition and combustion products from fires. In addition to particulates and other air pollutants such as carbon monoxide, nitrous oxide and sulphur dioxides, chemical vapours may also be released as a result of the fire. Some of these chemicals can cause strong odours that are detectable at very low levels below that which there is a direct harmful effect. As with all fires there will be a large range of substances in the plume at low levels which may include dioxins and polychlorinated-biphenyls (PCBs), which are a family of very hazardous substances.

The risk of longer term health effects from exposures over weeks to the kinds of chemicals that are generally found in smoke is very low. The main concern associated with exposure to dioxins and PCBs arises from exposure over years.

At very low levels, dioxins and PCBs are widespread in the general environment; particularly in foods we eat (such as dairy products, meat, fish and shellfish). This means that all people have a background exposure and a certain level of dioxins in the body. Inhalation of dioxins during a fire like this makes up only a

small proportion of the contribution to total exposure to dioxins. If dioxins were formed in the fire they would be associated with the particulate matter and would be present only at very low levels. If inhaled smoke did contain dioxins the likely exposures are considered to make a small contribution to body burden (the long term effect on the human body) and to be insignificant compared to the concentrations that a human being can be exposed throughout life without harm. Any exposure from the fire will be a small proportion of the cumulative long term background intake. At the end of the site clearance, data from the monitoring equipment will be sent to toxicologists at PHE for further analysis. This will be used to provide further reassurance in terms of the long term health effects from this incident.

Will air quality data be released?

The constant monitoring of the air quality data is an important part of this clearance plan: it is being fed back to the people carrying out the work because, alongside other issues such as weather conditions, it determines how the work is done. The raw data is analysed by scientific health experts who have many years of experience and training to read and interpret the information. We want this information to be meaningful for you, so we'll be publishing regular summaries of expected air quality via www.emergencynorthyorks.gov.uk/greatheck The full data can be released to anyone who wishes to see it.

What about evacuating residents if the situation deteriorates?

The clearance plan includes a daily risk assessment to enable to us to manage the work to minimise the impact on you. As per the health advice above, we do not believe that the smoke or odours from the site will cause any high risk health issues, but we will keep this under constant review. The point at which we would suggest alternative accommodation for people affected is if there was a high risk to health; with the daily risk assessment in place we do not believe this is currently appropriate but it could be put in place in the unlikely event it became necessary.

Next steps

The clearance operation depends on weather conditions, but we expect it to take several weeks to cool the material and transport it off site.

You can sign-up for alerts about the clearance by sending your details to communications@selby.gov.uk.

You can keep up-to-date online via www.emergencynorthyorks.gov.uk/greatheck

We'll also be sending out more of these update newsletters as the work progresses. The next one is planned for week commencing 30 November 2015. If, in the meantime, there is anything that we think you should be aware of, we will, of course, continue to update the website.

The Environment Agency, North Yorkshire Fire & Rescue Service, Selby District Council, North Yorkshire County Council and Public Health England have been working together to find a solution to the problems with the Great Heck waste site since the operators went into liquidation earlier in the year.