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I-Team Update: Secrets In The Soil

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Reporting

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FT. LAUDERDALE (CBS4) Environmental consultant Frank Estok did not have encouraging news as he toured the Ft Lauderdale neighborhood of Durrs with CBS4 News Chief Investigative reporter Michele Gillen. He knew what was hidden in the soil beneath their feet.

"This is an area that was found to have contaminants of dioxin in it," Gillen asked?

"Right, Right," Estok said.

Durrs is the kind of neighborhood where a child scribbles her name in the soil, too young to understand that tests have turned up so many toxins and chemicals in ground beneath the Fort Lauderdale neighborhood, that the State recommends avoiding any contact with dirt or dust there.

"Nobody around here is being treated fairly," one worried Durrs resident told Gillen.

A community where many residents are living in fear, Durrs is haunted by an invisible but potentially toxic legacy of a garbage incinerator site that for decades spewed so much ash it was likened to snow.

The ash allegedly blanketed the ground upon which homes, the neighborhood park and what in official documents was called the incinerator site school for the Negro children were built.

Decades later Alfonso Hicks, like many of his neighbors, knows that the yellow markings etched across their streets inches from their yards mean someone has tested the soil, but many the I-Team spoke with didn't know that what was found.

One of the chemicals in the soil is Dioxin, one of the most dangerous, potentially cancer causing chemicals in he world.

"It's unbelievable that in a civilized society we have something like this. Where people can walk around in a contaminated area and no one gives a damn," said Estok, who is working with the legal aid attorneys representing neighborhood residents in a lawsuit against the City of Ft. Lauderdale.

Estok is investigating residents fears they might be sick from living here.

Directly behind the Hicks home, Estok pointed out a city owned lot that is supposed to be fenced in because of the alarming degree of dioxin found there.

"Dioxin. This area was sampled and they had that high a number," said Estok. He said the results were 240 parts per trillion, 34 times the limit that according to state regulations should trigger a cleanup in a residential area.

That is unacceptable to Louise Caro, an attorney with the Legal Aid Service of Broward County.

"The city of Fort Lauderdale should be embarrassed this is not what they should be doing to

their community. Its disgusting," said Caro.

On behalf of nearly 100 current and former residents of Durrs, including cancer victim Gail Hinton, Caro has filed suit against the city of Fort Lauderdale claiming residents may have been exposed to dangerous chemicals for decades and not told toxins in the ground that could have - and still may - make them sick.

But Caro says no one is willing to pay for testing she believes is needed - not the state or city - or monitor the failing health of men and woman who might offer clues as to what damage the toxins may have caused generations who grew up here.

Martin, who just returned from more medical tests following her recent surgery to remove her uterus, is speaking out as her doctors suggested she investigate the possibility her cancer could be linked to the environment in which she grew up.

Gail left the neighborhood she believes made her seriously ill. Not everybody can, even though many admit they don't feel safe in Durrs.

"No, no but I just can't afford to move no where else at the time. I can't afford it. I have to stay where I have to stay right now. It's terrible. It's terrible," said Libby Gallen who has lived in Durrs since she was 3 years old.

"It's contaminating and we know it. We know it. But what could we do," asked Gallen? "Stop it. Help us out! Do something about it."

"This area needs to be cleaned up immediately," said Estok.

Despite the concern, the fence around the city lot remains pulled down, though a spokesman for the city told the I-Team Thursday that it would soon be repaired.

Spokesman Ted Lawson blamed the access to the lot on vandals who took the fence down, but he said neighborhood residents should know to avoid the site, which is posted with warning signs.

"People absolutely know what is in the soil there," Lawson said. "In the last 3 years there have been 4 public meetings there, and there have been a door to door campaign of information handed out. Door to door."

City officials repeatedly have stressed that a report on the site claims the level of contamination found does not present a public health hazard, although people are warned against breathing the dust.

However, the author of that report has told the I-Team she would like to see yard-by-yard testing of the neighborhood, something that has not been done.

No health monitoring to the residents is being done to track any possible link between the neighborhood and illness.

Louis Caro asks people to imagine how they would feel if this were their neighborhood.

"You would be outraged. You would say not in my yard. Not in my yard, not at my house, not with my children. We're not going to accept this and this had better be tested, and this had better be cleaned up."

"And we are not going away, until that's done."