BEC tests: Dioxins are still high in some areas

By MARY WESTON
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OROVILLE — Preliminary results indicate that dioxin levels are still high in some areas of south Oroville, 25 years after a large fire at the Koppers Wood Treatment Facility, according to the Butte Environmental Council, even though the average overall levels appear to have decreased.

The council reported on the latest test results for dioxin in eggs of chickens tested in people’s backyards near the former Koppers plant during a discussion at the Oroville library Monday.

Dioxins can contaminate the soil and chickens forage on the ground, so they can ingest dioxins, which are mainly stored in fatty tissues and in egg yolks.

Monday night, about 20 people showed up to hear a report by Mary Muchowski, education and outreach coordinator for the council.

“So the mean levels of dioxin have gone down in the area since 1987,” Muchowski said.

Despite the decrease, the council’s tests indicated a slight increase in dioxin levels in...
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The 2000s, and there are still some areas that test extremely high.

Dioxins are toxic chemicals that can be produced when garbage, plastics, metals, wood and other materials are burned.

The issue became a concern near the former Koppers facility after a fire in 1987. The plant near Ophir Road and South Fifth Avenue used pentachlorophenol, PCP, which releases dioxin when it burns. This chemical is used to treat railroad ties, telephone poles and other wood products for preservation.

Muchowski said the Environmental Health Investigations branch of the California Department of Public Health conducted dioxin tests on backyard chicken eggs in 1988 and 1994, leading to an advisory against eating eggs from free-range chickens in the south Oroville area.

After the superfund cleanup of Koppers was closed, public health planned no further tests, Muchowski said. So the environmental council has tested backyard chicken eggs with a grant from The California Wellness Foundation over the last several years.

The tests show the mean dioxin level in the south Oroville area has gone down from 2.2 parts per trillion after the 1988/1994 tests to .636 parts per trillion. The test results include data from a first round of tests combined with July 2011/February 2012 test results.

The environmental council asked local chicken owners to participate in tests that measured dioxin levels in the eggs.

Dioxin levels at various sites ranged between .004 parts per trillion and 14.7 ppt. That compared to .08 ppt to 18 ppt at sites in earlier testing.

A Chico test came back at .005 ppt, and a Forest Ranch test came back at .8 parts per trillion.

Dioxin can also be released by forest fires and industries that burn wood and other products, Muchowski said.

The areas that yielded high dioxin levels in the council’s tests were along Lincoln Boulevard north of Ophir Road and along Lincoln Boulevard south of Ophir Road toward Palermo.

Backyard burn barrels and wood stoves can also produce dioxins.

Dioxins have been blamed for a variety of illnesses including diabetes, cancer and auto-immune system diseases, Muchowski said.

She advised people who raise chickens to keep them in a coop or other above-ground structure that keeps them off the ground, including a bed of straw. She also advised people to be careful about breathing dirt and burning wood and other materials, and to vacuum their houses frequently.

Muchowski said to wash fruits and veggies to avoid dioxins. However, fruits and vegetables themselves do not contain high levels of dioxin, because they have very low levels of fat.

The only way to determine if a site is contaminated with dioxin is to test the soil, and tests cost about $1,000 per egg, said Julia Murphy, education and administrative assistant for the council.

There is no set limit on the amount of dioxin allowed in chicken eggs; however, the U.S. government has pulled commercial eggs off shelves at 1 ppt in the past.

Murphy said the million-dollar question is how much dioxin can a person be exposed to without health risks.

“And the answer is blowing in the wind,” she said.

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