Permitted amount lead and arsenic levels in soil revised

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The permitted levels of lead and arsenic in the soil at development sites are being decreased based on public concerns, according to a new policy proposed by the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection.

The DEP is revising their policy this week, taking public opinions that were received during a three-month period into account. The level of lead allowed in the first three feet of soil would be decreased from 300 to 200 parts per million and the level of arsenic would be increased to 20ppm, according to Ed Coletta, spokesperson for DEP.

Levels of chemicals 15 feet below the surface would be unchecked, since they would not come into contact with humans.

“It won’t have a big impact on construction projects in general because the levels that [the developers] have to clean in the surface soil are much lower,” said Susan Chapnick, president at New Environmental Horizons, Inc. “They still have to clean the surface soil where it could potentially be reached … [and DEP] increased the depth that [the chemical] has to be buried.”

Chapnick said although some of the allowed levels of individual chemicals are rising, altogether there would be a smaller amount of chemical materials in the ground.

“DEP was following their mandate of protecting human health and the environment. A lot of the standards actually went down in the surface soil where you would have the most potential exposure to children and to humans,” she said. “That is, if you look at all the individual chemicals, besides arsenic … the fact that some standards went up is directly related to their kind of exposure.”

Chapnick is on board with the DEP’s decision because she said they try to tailor to the public’s concerns. According to her, the original policy was to allow 300 ppm of lead into the soil, but the

public was concerned that those levels were not safe enough, so the DEP lowered it to 200ppm, a more accepted level by the public.

“[The DEP] is trying to stay on the forefront of what’s the latest science,” she said.

Gregory Vasil, chief executive officer at Greater Boston Real Estate Board, assures the public that some of the arsenic levels occurring in soil, especially fifteen feet underground, are naturally occurring.

“When agencies decide to change rules they base it on science, the risk exposure and risk pathways,” he said. “The most risk to people is either inhalation or ingestion. I’m pretty comfortable if the scientists down at DEP looked at this and found there’s not a risk to people.”

Vasil, who once was the head of the Massachusetts Environmental Crime Unit, said for real estate, there are three factors: soft costs, hard costs, and land costs. The hard costs being what it would cost to clean an area that would be developed on.

“When you have dirty land, there’s a cost to clean it up that’s sometimes so prohibitive that nothing will be built on that site and it can be pretty restrictive,” he said. “What this might do is take property that otherwise might just be sitting vacant and actually be able to turn it into something useful.”

Vasil said these are good policy changes, which will not have harmful effects for people interacting or living on the sites.

“No one’s going to be eating the dirt,” he said. “These are all metals, so they’re not going to inhale them. It’s not like it’s a volatile, oil-based product, so I think it’s a good thing for development … I think the risk environmentally to the people is minimal.”

However, despite the support from officials, the public was not convinced that the chemicals are truly safe.

“It’s hard to decide because I understand [the complications],” said Shalena Fye, 22, of Dorchester. “They need to take [the health risks] more into consideration and what’s going to be built there. That’s my only concern. If there’s something harmful, they should really take that into consideration.”

Kimberly Dragon, 27, of Brighton, said she did not like the idea.

“If there isn’t anything else they can do with it then it doesn’t sound like the worst thing that could happen,” she said. “But I’d rather avoid as many chemicals as possible.”

Harold Jean Baptist, 52, of Dorchester, said that no amount of burying will protect people forever and said eventually the chemicals will be at the top of the soil.

“They should bury it deeper,” he said. “What happens is the soil washes away slowly so eventually the soil could come back to the surface, and in the water. We can’t see it but millimeters of dirt blows away. It’s common sense.”