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From the Baltimore Sun

# Allied kept mum on arsenic, report says

## Chemical firm's test showed city park was poisoned

By Tom Pelton  
sun reporter

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The Allied Chemical Company deliberately withheld test results three decades ago showing high arsenic levels in a South Baltimore park, a city task force concludes in a report released yesterday.

The task force found that Allied Chemical allowed local health officials in 1976 to falsely believe that levels of arsenic in Swann Park were low and resulted from the city's routine spraying of weed killer.

But internal documents show the company knew that large amounts of arsenic -- a carcinogen -- billowed through torn filters on smokestacks of the Allied pesticide factory next to the park, at one point blanketing the ball fields "like snow," according to the report by the Swann Park Task Force.

And company testing showed that arsenic levels in the soil of the park were as high as 10,000 parts per million, the report said.

A committee of state, federal and local public health officials allowed the reopening of the park in 1976, believing that arsenic levels were as low as .25 parts per million.

The criterion often used by the state today for requiring a cleanup of arsenic in residential areas is 20 parts per million, a guideline adopted in 2001. There was no cleanup standard in the 1970s.

The impact of the higher arsenic levels on the health of people in South Baltimore is not clear, city health officials said. A federal health agency released a report in June saying that children playing on arsenic-laced dirt in the park since 1976 probably have not suffered increased risk of disease, unless they ate the soil. But that report considered lower arsenic levels than those revealed yesterday, and it may be revised based on information from the new report, according to the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.

The release of carcinogenic dust into the air -- which could cause lung cancer -- likely ended in 1976 when the Allied pesticide plant closed, task force members said.

A spokeswoman for Allied's successor company, Honeywell International, said it is not clear why the company did not share its test results in 1976. "Events and actions that long ago are unfortunately not clear to us today," spokeswoman Victoria Streitfeld said.

Baltimore Health Commissioner Dr. Joshua M. Sharfstein, who led the five-member task force, said yesterday that he believes

more testing for arsenic in the neighborhood is warranted to find out how broadly the pollution spread.

"The evidence we received suggests that the company did not share what it knew, and as a result, the public health committee made a decision based on incomplete information," he said.

He also faulted the 1976 committee for reopening Swann Park without demanding more information.

In April, the city and state closed the park, which was popular among children's sports leagues, after Allied's successor company, Honeywell International, turned over confidential documents to the state showing high arsenic levels in the park dating back three decades.

The state Department of the Environment has given Honeywell, a major defense contracting firm based in New Jersey, until next month to come up with a plan to clean up the contamination.

Allied Chemical, later called AlliedSignal, acquired Honeywell in 1999, then adopted that company's better-known name.

The report released yesterday shows that testing by the federal Environmental Protection Agency in 1976 found arsenic levels in the park soil at 0.25 parts per million, and that state testing the same year found up to 1,340 parts per million.

Allied knew that there was a wide discrepancy between these test results and the company's own tests, which showed up to 10,000 parts per million, according to the task force report, which cited internal company memos as sources for the higher figure.

"Allied Chemical's apparent failure to disclose data showing high levels of arsenic in Swann Park cannot be explained by (1) a lack of understanding of the potential problem; (2) a misunderstanding ... or (3) poor access to task force members," the report says. "The company did consider the test results to be subject to attorney-client privilege."

During the manufacture of lead arsenate and other pesticides, the Allied plant used dust filter bags that "were constantly developing leaks and arsenic was being discharged into the atmosphere," the report says. "In 1962 or 1963, a collector bag broke and 'coated Swann Park -- looked like snow,'" according to an Allied document quoted in the report.

Dr. Lynn R. Goldman, a professor at the Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health who serves on the city task force, said 10,000 parts per million of arsenic would have posed a health risk to children. And levels in the park during the 1960s might have been even higher when discharges "looked like snow," she said.

O'Neil Banks, a former state labor official who served on the 1976 committee that reopened the park, said the group's focus wasn't on arsenic because the main worry at the time was a pesticide made at the plant called Kepone. It became the subject of a congressional investigation.

"Our concern was not with arsenic. ... This was very much of a side issue," said Banks. If the company had more information about arsenic, he said, "we did not really search aggressively for it."

Don Wade, football coach and athletic director at Southern High School during the 1970s and 1980s, said he's angry that his players practiced in a park that was contaminated with poison. "That's what irritates me -- [the company] knew this stuff was there, and they didn't tell us, and the lives of kids could have been cut short," Wade said.

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