

# Fresh questions seep into dormant landfill issue

*Residents worry that the St. Johns site still is polluting the slough*

By BEN JACKLET  
The Tribune

Ray Piltz has firsthand knowledge of at least some of the hazards buried in the St. Johns Landfill.

The 68-year-old St. Johns resident recalls that one of his duties as an employee at a North Portland chemical plant in the 1960s was to haul off hazardous materials and dispose of them at the St. Johns dump.

"We used to dump it during swing shift, when there was only one guy on duty there," Piltz says. "He used to just wave us on through. All of this stuff was dumped in the northeast section of the dump."

The St. Johns Landfill, the

city's dumping grounds for more than 50 years, today bears little resemblance to the huge pile of decomposing trash that infuriated North Portlanders in the past. Garbage stopped going there in 1991. The 238-acre expanse, which has been capped with plastic, sand and topsoil and planted with grass, looks more like a park than an environmental mess.

But Piltz and other neighbors question whether the landfill's cap is doing its job. They trace pollution in the nearby Columbia Slough back to the landfill, and they raise questions about the health risks to the people who paddle and fish nearby as well as to the ospreys, kingfishers and other animals that live in the surrounding wetlands.

Officials from Metro, the agency that owns the landfill, and the state Department of Environmental Quality say they intend to address those questions and others with a series of investigations required for Metro's closure permit.

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— Ray Piltz,  
St. Johns resident

The permit must be renewed every 10 years and is expiring this year. The studies will evaluate the extent of the pollution and the risks caused by the landfill.

Agency officials and neighborhood critics disagree sharply about the level of pollution and the associated risks. Piltz and others suggest that the landfill's cap has failed and should be rebuilt. Tim Spencer, a project manager from the DEQ's solid waste division, says the barrier has been effective.

"Before the cap was built, the entire landfill used to be ringed with these nasty-looking seeps leaching out from the landfill," Spencer says. "After the cap was built, they all disappeared."

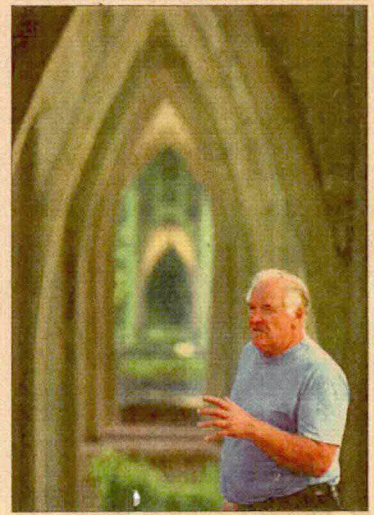
Still, environmental investigations have shown that the area is far from pristine. More than 30 contaminants have been detected in nearby groundwater, including arsenic, lead and trichloroethylene.

"It's a terrible problem, and Metro's stuck with it, just like North Portland's stuck with it," Piltz says. "We want to see it dealt with."

## Toxic seeps led to closure

The St. Johns Landfill was built over a shallow lake in the 1930s with \$300,000 in bonds.

Almost entirely surrounded by water, the site served as the city's main dump before space began to run out in the 1970s



Ray Piltz, standing under the St. Johns Bridge, says one of his duties as an employee at a Portland chemical plant in the 1960s was to haul hazardous materials to the St. Johns dump, which is on the Columbia Slough in the North Portland neighborhood.

TRIBUNE FILE PHOTO:  
JIM CLARK

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A4 NEWS

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## Landfill: Neighbors, DEQ at odds over risks



### 'Trash Island'

The 238-acre St. Johns Landfill is almost entirely surrounded by water. Environmental investigations have identified more than 30 contaminants in the area, including arsenic, mercury and trichloroethylene. The landfill closed in 1991.

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and environmental regulations tightened.

Paul Vandenberg, senior solid waste planner at Metro, stresses that "the regulations we have today were not in place for most of the time that the St. Johns landfill was active. So even though it was primarily a municipal landfill, we know that hazardous substances were deposited there as well."

Some of the most toxic material came from the former Rhone-Poulenc chemical plant in Northwest Portland. That factory manufactured pesticides and herbicides, including now-banned Agent Orange and DDT.

**Agency officials and neighborhood critics disagree sharply about the level of pollution and the associated risks.**

Records show that 5,000 drums of chemical waste were transported to the landfill from Rhone-Poulenc between 1958 and 1962.

Studies showing that toxins were leaking out of the landfill and into nearby water were one reason for closing the landfill in 1991.

Since then, Metro and its contractors have spent \$36 million capping the site with a plastic membrane and building a piping system for capturing methane gas and reusing it at a nearby cement plant.

The purpose of the plastic cap over the garbage is to stop rainwater from washing pollution out into the slough or down into the groundwater.

Officials from the DEQ and

Metro say the cap has helped to improve water quality in the Columbia Slough.

William Michael "Mikey" Jones, who has been fighting for North Portland's wetlands for decades, disagrees. He calls the membrane cap "a job done so poorly that they'll have to start from scratch."

## A history of dissent

Jones argues that tides, erosion and the weight of the soil on top of the garbage pile have all taken their toll on the site. He says pollution is draining down into the groundwater and spilling out into the slough badly enough that it merits a new construction effort.

The DEQ's Spencer says the science doesn't back up Jones' charges.

"I really don't see any evidence for the things he's bringing up," Spencer says.

Jones, however, has a history of taking on large agencies over

complicated environmental issues, and he has scored some big victories.

The Union Pacific Railroad engineer was instrumental in pushing for the lawsuit that led to the city's billion-dollar Clean Rivers sewer pipe project. He also won a lawsuit against the Port of Portland in 1997, persuading a federal judge to order the port to restore wetlands in North Portland.

Spencer says the DEQ's goal is to collaborate with neighborhood groups, not fight them. He says he plans to meet with Jones and representatives from the St. Johns Neighborhood Association during the next month to discuss areas of disagreement.

"There are suspicions that have been festering for many years," Spencer says. "We want to resolve them."

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