

Investigators check extent of mercury exposure

By ROD ANTONE

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Federal officials have expanded their search for the source of a Yakima mercury contamination incident, this time including the property next door to the home of a teenager diagnosed with mercury poisoning last week.

Two younger neighbors of 16-year-old Fabian Flores claimed to have seen the mercury before, and at least one boy said he played with it nearly every day for two months. The boys live in separate houses on the same property at 1011 S. Sixth St., next door to the Flores home at 1013 S. Sixth St.

"Played with it mostly every day ... they had it in a Pepsi bottle," 12-year-old Cesar Figueroa said Tuesday. "We put it on the ground and in our hands."

Figueroa said Flores and his younger brother, 13-year-old Omar Flores, showed the bottle of mercury to him eight months ago and that the last time he played with it was six months ago. Another boy, 12-year-old Vicente Mendoza, said he saw what looked like a small amount of mercury spilled on the sidewalk in front of the Flores house while walking with Omar last month.

"It was on the ground like little dots," he said. "He (Omar) told me to touch it but I didn't touch it."

Neither boy appeared ill, but U.S. Environmental Protection Agency officials want air monitoring tests in the yards and homes of both boys. They also urged their families to take them in for medical checkups.

"They should be OK," said Tony Brown, EPA public affairs specialist. "But it doesn't hurt to check."

Air samples taken at Flores' home found high traces of mercury vapor in his room Monday night. EPA workers spent an hour Tuesday afternoon taking items out of Flores' house -- shoes, clothes, videotapes and a mattress -- to try to figure out where the mercury readings were coming from.

Brown said that according to the Flores family, Fabian got hold of the mercury sometime last summer and started showing signs of illness in October. He was diagnosed with mercury poisoning last week and remains hospitalized at Children's Hospital & Regional Medical Center in Seattle.

His mother said in an earlier interview that while her son was sick at home, he was shaking and hallucinating, claiming at times to see the devil. It is unclear whether Flores' mother took him to the doctor prior to last week, although she has said that when she saw her boys playing with the mercury inside the house she did not know what it was or how dangerous it could be.

"This is affecting their whole family, even if the mother and the brother didn't test positive for it," Brown said. "He's in the hospital, they've been forced out of their home and they might lose their household goods if they've been tainted."

"It's a wake-up call for everybody, I guess."

Besides stripping Flores' room and sealing off the house, officials have also closed down South Sixth Street for about two blocks in both directions. Brown said traffic was threatening workers who were constantly



ANDY SAWYER/Yakima Herald-Republic

Cesar Figueroa, 12, stands in the yard on South Sixth Street in Yakima on Tuesday, next door to where Fabian Flores was badly sickened by mercury. Figueroa said he often played with the mercury, too.

walking back and forth between the EPA command center across the street from the Flores home. The EPA even posts security at night to make sure no one breaks into the Flores home while the family is still in Seattle with Fabian.

One neighbor said he couldn't believe all the activity on his street the past couple of days was because of mercury, a basic element on the periodic table.

"I learned what mercury was in the fifth grade ... I knew not to mess with it back then," said Sergio Delgado, who lives a couple of houses away from the Flores family. "I don't know what they're teaching now. "It's crazy ... this is serious stuff if they close down our street."

To make sure people in the area knew what mercury looked like, survey teams from the Yakima Health District took samples of it door to door in glass containers along with questionnaires to find out if anyone else had been exposed to the mercury or knew where it came from. Although health district officials had approached a dozen households Monday with the same questionnaire, they went back out with the samples Tuesday to ask again, this time with visual aids.

"We weren't sure they understood what we were talking about," said Gordon Kelly, the district's director of environmental health.

Brown also said at some point health officials will go to Eisenhower High School to check Flores' locker, in case he brought any mercury to school with him.

Brown said Flores is listed in stable condition at Children's Hospital.

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