

Lead in the environment

I am writing in response to Peggy Ollerhead's op-ed, "Protect our children from Hudbay lead danger," which rightly condemns Hudbay's dangerous waste disposal plan because of potentially exposing nearby residents, including children, to lead contamination. As a geology student at the University of Arizona, I co-produced an informational video documenting the history of lead contamination in the U.S. in which I interviewed Dr. Mona Hanna-Attisha on her work during the Flint Michigan crisis of elevated lead in drinking water. For even worse lead contamination, it is important to acknowledge the damage done by adding lead to gasoline in the 20th century, which disseminated lead across all environments and was arguably the largest ecological catastrophe in U.S. history because of wreaking incalculable harm to people. For example, a recent study showed that poisoning from leaded gas blunted the IQ of about half the U.S. population. People, especially children, must not be exposed to ingestible lead again.

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Peggy Ollerhead

Hudbay's 2023 Pre-Feasibility Study shows that their Copper World project plans to dump massive amounts of mining waste containing lead, arsenic, and other hazardous materials within 600 feet of houses and 1 1/2 miles from Copper Ridge Elementary School in Corona de Tucson. I am appealing to the public, which may be unaware that this lead would threaten the lives of children who live near the proposed mine.

I feel so strongly about this danger that I have spoken out at public hearings and sent written comments to the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality and to publicly elected officials.

Where did I learn about the dangers of lead? In the early 1990s, I worked as a special educator conducting psycho-educational evaluations at the Kennedy Krieger Institute (KKI), affiliated with Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, MD. Doctors and scientists at KKI study children and young adults with developmental disorders. I am still haunted by memories of children I tested who had been poisoned by lead, a neurotoxin that damages the developing brain and is most dangerous to those under the age of 6.

According to Stanford University's fact sheet about the effects of lead poisoning in children, lead poisoning can affect just about every system in the body with a bewildering array of symptoms that can include:

- Damage to the brain and nervous system
- Behavior and learning problems
- Hearing problems
- Headaches

- Anemia

Very high blood lead levels (BLL) can cause convulsions, coma, and death. But even low levels are dangerous. Both the American Medical Association and the national Centers for Disease Control (CDC) emphasize that “There is no known safe BLL.” And representatives from the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality agreed with my comments at their Aug. 14, 2024, informational meeting in Vail, stating, “Yes, there is no safe lead level for children, that is scientifically a fact.”

Children of parents whose work brings them into contact with lead may be at additional risk. The American Journal for Public Health (AJPH) devoted a special issue to this “take home lead” health emergency, warning how adults may transfer lead from their work clothes to their homes. The journal also emphasized how important it is to monitor for air-borne lead at ground level and in the soil where children play. Such monitoring will be essential, given that strong Arizona winds will almost certainly blow dust from the tailings piles into neighboring communities.

We must stand up for the safety of our children. Given what we know about lead, how can the Arizona Department of Environmental Quality justify the air permit they gave Copper World in January that will allow it to pile tailings so close to homes? Why is the State of Arizona putting the economic interests of a foreign mining company above the health of our children? Fortunately, Save the Scenic Santa Ritas is fighting to protect our children by appealing this dangerous permit. We citizens must demand that the Department of Environmental Quality give in to the appeal and revoke the air permit.