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Fruit and vegetables to be tested for presence of solvent

(Juneau, Alaska) – Four North Pole gardeners are providing samples for a test to determine levels of sulfolane in their plants. The industrial solvent was found in wells near the Flint Hills refinery last fall.

The samples come from areas with groundwater contaminated by sulfolane. The goal of the project is to see if plants cultivated with affected well water show a presence of sulfolane, and if so, how much. The Alaska Departments of Environmental Conservation (DEC) and Health and Social Services (DHSS) are overseeing the test.

Participants are providing samples this week. They include fast-growing vegetables such as leaf lettuce, rhubarb and zucchini. The samples are being sent to a Minneapolis lab and results will be available in about three weeks.

The purpose of the garden sampling project is to provide feedback to the gardeners and the public during this summer's growing season. Results on individual samples will be given to participants. Overall results will be made public, but without identifying participants.

Samples of slower-growing plants will be collected at the end of the growing season, when the plants are ready for harvest. They will include tomatoes, carrots, beets, strawberries, peas and corn if available.

A more in-depth, rigorous and longer-term controlled greenhouse study is now being planned. The study, which will be a multi-year effort, will provide more conclusive answers on the safety of gardening with sulfolane-affected water. A technical project team is overseeing that study, the garden sampling project and Flint Hills' overall investigation and cleanup of sulfolane-affected groundwater. The team put together by DEC includes experts in toxicology, environmental chemistry, botany, hydrology and engineering.

Gardeners interested in taking part in the garden sampling project should call Nim Ha (see contact information above).

For more information about sulfolane well contamination in North Pole:
<http://dec.alaska.gov/spar/csp/sites/north-pole-refinery/>.