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Press Release

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Sulfolane levels low or undetected in tested North Pole garden plants

Results for late growing plants will be released after the end-of-season harvest

(Anchorage, Alaska) — Early results from a North Pole garden sampling project indicate that some edible garden plants retain sulfolane from tainted well water. When detected, sulfolane levels were below those considered a health risk. The project's aim is to give feedback to gardeners using water affected by sulfolane – an industrial solvent found in wells near the Flint Hills refinery last fall.

“Although these preliminary tests do reveal sulfolane in some, but not all, garden plants, the levels detected were low and shouldn't cause any health effects in people who eat them,” said Environmental Public Health Program Manager Lori Verbrugge from the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services, Section of Epidemiology.

The results were based on the testing of six types of plants from four North Pole gardens. Sulfolane was found in the leafy parts of two types of plants, but not in the roots, stems, fruits, or flowers. Lettuce and rhubarb leaves were the only samples that tested positive for sulfolane, though at low levels. “This finding makes sense, because other plant studies show that sulfolane tends to concentrate where most of the water evaporation occurs, which is typically in the leaves,” said Verbrugge. “More testing will show if we also see this in other types of edible garden plants.”

The Alaska departments of Environmental Conservation and Health and Social Services are overseeing the tests. Results on individual samples have been provided to participants. Overall results will be made public without identifying participants. Samples of slower-growing plants will be collected and tested at the end of the growing season.

A fact sheet that summarizes the early results of the North Pole garden sampling project is available online at <http://www.epi.alaska.gov/eh/sulfolane/DHSSGardenSamplingEarlyResultsFactSheet.pdf>.

Gardeners interested in taking part in the garden sampling should contact Nim Ha, DHSS, (907) 269-8028, nim.ha@alaska.gov.

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

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