

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

June 9, 2009

UC Berkeley Richmond Field Station Remediation and Restoration and Settlement news

Q. What is the Richmond Field Station (RFS)?

The RFS is a 170-acre parcel owned by the University of California (UC), located in Richmond, about five miles from the central UC Berkeley campus. It is used primarily for College of Engineering academic teaching and research activities, but also houses some non-UC tenants. Current uses include housing of one of world's largest earthquake shaking tables; sophisticated test facilities for transportation research; the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's Region 9 Laboratory; and a library facility that archives infrequently used books for four UC campuses.

The open areas of the RFS are prized for their research and habitat value. The field station contains one of the largest and best preserved remaining areas of native coastal grasslands that were once prevalent throughout the Bay Area and a tidal salt marsh that is home to the California clapper rail a federally listed endangered species.

Q. Why was an environmental clean up at RFS and neighboring property needed?

Prior to the university's purchase of the property, now known as Richmond Field Station, in 1950, the property and nearby areas were owned by industrial manufacturing companies dating back as far as 1870. Those companies left behind numerous contaminants from production of such items as blasting caps, sulfuric acid and pesticides. When the University of California purchased the property, it assumed the liability for materials left by the previous property owner, the California Cap Company.

UC Berkeley has established a multi-year program to clean up contaminated areas and restore them for use by researchers and the community or as ecological habitat. Work first began in 2002 with removal of the largest areas of contaminated soils, which were excavated and transported off-site for disposal. Restoration of marsh, including the removal of weeds and addition of plants, began in 2004 and is on-going, along with continuing site sampling and monitoring. Such efforts, including final remediation work, are expected to continue through 2013.

Regulatory oversight of the RFS cleanup transferred from the state Environmental Protection Agency's Regional Water Quality Control Board to the state Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC), in 2005, and the DTSC oversight of the RFS clean up work continues. Both the DTSC and the water quality board are arms of the state EPA.

Q: Are any of the chemicals at RFS harmful to my health?

During normal activities -- such as working in offices and labs or walking and bicycling around the property -- RFS occupants and visitors would not have sufficient contact with the contaminants, most of which are in the marsh, to put them at risk.

If a person were exposed to sufficient amounts of contaminants present in some restricted locations through ingestion (eating), inhalation (breathing) or skin absorption when digging in soils, however, it could potentially be harmful to his or her health. Therefore, all activities

involving digging in soils at the RFS are prohibited without approval of the RFS management and the campus Office of Environment, Health & Safety.

Q: Why is UC paying a settlement to a state oversight agency?

The state Environmental Protection Agency's Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC) has contended that the university did not obtain certain administrative permits for the remedial work the university performed from 2002 to 2004. The university obtained administrative permits from various agencies before beginning its cleanup work. However, according to the DTSC's Summary of Violations issued in 2007, the university should have acquired hazardous waste permits from the DTSC or acquired authorization from DTSC to perform the work.

The issue was not whether the cleanup was sufficient – the state Department of Public Health has concluded that the university's handling of the soil posed no public health risk – but whether the university should have obtained administrative permits from DTSC as part of the planning done in advance of the cleanup effort

The university denies the allegations that it violated any applicable permit requirements but decided to settle the matter in order to focus on the ongoing site work at the Richmond Field Station. The university will pay \$142,500 to DTSC as well as \$142,500 to a neighborhood jobs training program known as Richmond BUILD.

Q: What is Richmond BUILD?

The Richmond BUILD Pre-Apprenticeship Construction Skills & Solar Technology Training Program is a nationally recognized solar technology training program for Richmond residents. It was established by the city of Richmond in 2007 to create career opportunities for Richmond residents from low-income neighborhoods and to enhance the environment by supporting renewable energy projects.

The program was recently honored in Washington D.C. as the only northern California program to receive the 2008 FBI Director's Community Leadership Award for career mobility in the green economy and as an innovative approach to addressing violence prevention.

Q: What governmental review process did UC Berkeley follow before DTSC was assigned to oversee the cleanup effort?

During the period in question by DTSC, all UC remediation work at the RFS had been conducted under permits issued by several government agencies and with oversight by the San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality Control Board, an arm of the state EPA and sister agency of DTSC.

The university had also worked with the Army Corps of Engineers, the Bay Conservation and Development Commission, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the East Bay Regional Parks District, and the city of Richmond. It also prepared cleanup plan documents under the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act, which required distribution of the documents to numerous additional state agencies.

Q: What are the university's plans for the property after cleanup is finished?

Restoration of the wildlife habitat and marshland is very important, so the university plans include work and monitoring to return the area to one that is friendly to migratory birds and other flora and fauna. Future plans would maintain the environmental integrity of native grasslands and wetlands.

In addition, the university is interested in making greater use of the RFS to further the teaching and research programs of the Berkeley campus. The vision is to use part of the RFS for a multi-building scientific research campus, while encouraging and enhancing selected existing scientific research activities located on the property.

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