

POINT REYES LIGHT

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Point Reyes gym too toxic for comfort

by **Jacoba Charles**

The air quality in the West Marin School gymnasium falls into the poorest category, according to a preliminary test last month. The test was requested by school officials prior to the Wallace Stegner conference, in response to community concern and scattered complaints of dizziness, headaches and nausea from adults who spent time in the gym.

"This is the first time that we've heard of complaints, and we got on it right away," said Stephen Rosenthal, superin-

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Pro-deer wall slams park

by **Justin Nobel**

Since sharpshooters arrived in the Point Reyes National Seashore last summer they have culled nearly one thousand fallow and axis deer. Friends of the White Deer, a small group of deer advocates based in Dogtown, have pleaded with the park to halt the contract with White Buffalo, Inc., the wildlife management organization hired to do the job. They hope that the remaining roughly 200 animals will be left alive.

With culling slated to continue next month, FWD has ramped up their campaign, targeting all groups related to the project.

"We're going in as many directions as we discover and have people and time to go," said Richard Kirschman, FWD leader. "I'm

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Banners pleading for an end to the elimination of fallow and axis deer within the seashore were strung on the Grandi Building in Point Reyes Station last week. Photo by Justin Nobel.

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My dad laid the first runway at swampy Midway

Carbon-happy West Marin

by **Jacoba Charles**

Carbon emissions are a simple equation: nearly half of the carbon dioxide pumped into the Bay Area's atmosphere comes from driving. And in general, the more remote your home is, the more you drive.

"We in West Marin are enormously privileged to live in this relatively pristine place," said Liza Crosse, aide to Marin County Supervisor Steve Kinsey, who lives in Woodacre. "But in effect we consume more because we're so heavily reliant on goods and services that come

from far away."

Overall, Marin County residents have one of the largest "ecological footprints," meaning total number of acres that it takes to provide the natural resources used per person per year.

We would each need an average of 27 acres to support our lifestyle, according to the Marin Countywide Plan (CWP). The average footprint in the United States is 24 acres, and the world average is 5.5 acres. Given the current global population, the plan says, there are only 4.5 acres actually available to sustainably support each person.

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>> Gym

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tendent of the school district. "We've followed everything the experts have said to do so far. Now we're awaiting more tests to see if anything else needs to be done."

The gym is described as having a "plastic-like" smell, particularly when a blue tarp is spread out to protect the floors during community events such as fundraisers, parties and lectures. Though most people feel fine, some have suffered strong physical reactions.

"I've never been in a room that had so much toxicity," said Chris Anderl of Point Reyes Station, who didn't attend the Stegner conference because of the smell. "It was like a gas chamber. I had to get out of there."

Concerns

Steve Costa, proprietor of Point Reyes Books, said the problem came to his attention in 2006 after the bookstore first hosted an event in the gym. "Maybe half a dozen people mentioned to me that they had some sort of reaction," he said. "Our assumption at the time was that it was caused by the blue tarp."

Because some people have since reported symptoms when the tarp is in storage, other causes – such as the floor varnish – are also possible, said Costa.

"Indoor air quality is a new field, and we're learning more and more about how it may affect us," said Karen Schkolnick, air quality program manager with the nine-county Bay Area Air Quality Management District. "To date, products are not considered stationary sources."

Some individuals can even be affected by chemicals at very low levels that would meet approval, Schkolnick said. "One example is peanuts: we all eat them, but some people can't even be in a room where they are being served," she added.

However, there is also the fear that instead of being isolated cases of sensitivity, the affected individuals are better compared to canaries in the coal mine: revealing hazards that affect the rest of us, even though we can't perceive them.

In preparation for the three-day Stegner conference held in March, Costa requested that the air quality be tested to prove that the air is toxin-free. Though the testing is still in process, community concern remains – more so because children most frequently use the gym, whose smaller body size and fast respiratory rates make them more vulnerable to toxins.

Health impacts

No health effects are known to have been reported in children to date. However, there are numerous reports of symptoms from adults.

"I would say probably 12 to 14 people brought up the blue tarp and the smells

that come with it in direct conversation over the last year and a half," said West Marin School Board member Madeline Hope.

Costa said that he receives a handful of complaints after each event that Point Reyes Books hosts in the space. Eight people complained of symptoms after the Stegner conference.

"I lost all sense of balance and thought I was going to pass out," said Alene Moris, an 80-year-old conference attendee from Seattle who suffered severe dizziness after being in the room for fifteen minutes.



The West Marin School gym has made some people ill. Photo by G. Meyer.

"I did come in again but I came in through the side door and sat as closely as I could to the door. I didn't have any reaction."

"When I was in the gym I began getting a headache," said Dianne Fradkin, whose husband Philip is one of the conference organizers pushing for the air quality tests. "After I left, it increased in intensity, and became excruciating at about 5 a.m. I also had waves of nausea."

Fradkin has sensitivity to petrochemicals but says that she hasn't had a severe reaction in years.

"The first time I had a similar sensitivity was when we put a product on our own floor, in our own house, that specifically said non-toxic on the bottle," she said, adding that even seemingly benign products can cause problems.

Ironically, if the chemicals in the gym turn out to be non-toxic, the early exposure may spare the children from having attacks such as Fradkin's when they are adults.

"What's funny is that if people are exposed to the chemicals early, they will never bother them," said Marc Nash, an air quality specialist with the Bay Area Air Quality Management District. "Assuming the chemical lab doesn't change the formulation, they will probably not be sensitive to it. But changing a formula, even to make it less toxic, can suddenly trigger an allergy."

The air test

A single air sample was taken inside

the gym by Dominion Environmental on February 22. The blue tarp was not in the room during the test. Over the course of an hour, 40 liters of air were drawn into a tube, which was then sealed and sent to the Prism Analytical lab in Michigan.

The air sample was tested for total volatile organic compound (VOC) levels, as well as for eight specific chemicals commonly associated with paints and varnishes, according to the report.

Though none of the specific chemicals tested was anywhere near the workplace recommended exposure limits, the total

ditional tests to see what other chemicals are contributing to the total VOC levels.

A second test of the gym's air quality, and one of the blue tarp, were done on April 10, said Hope. The results are going to be discussed at the school board's monthly meeting on May 15. At tonight's board meeting, Rosenthal plans to make a brief statement about what is being done.

Both the tarp and the varnish are widely used brands with no known health risks, Rosenthal said.

The varnish used came from Hillyard, which Rosenthal described as one of the most reliable gym floor materials companies. "As per their recommendation we used #458 Tack-It which is a water based tacking solution and #260 350-Gym Finish which is a clear urethane ester varnish specifically for wood sports floors," he said.

The tarp is a GymGuard Floor Protection System, which was purchased from a Petaluma company called First Service in 2003, at a total cost of \$4576.10. It was described by Rosenthal, and online, as "an ultra-durable three-ply fabric that contains reinforcing polyester mesh yarns coated evenly with PVC."

The PVC component of the tarp has worried some community members.

"I'm sort of amazed that the school district wasn't aware of the intense debate and the dangers of PVC," said Philip Fradkin.

Possible solutions

The suspect blue tarp was conspicuously absent at last Friday's Fiesta. It has been rolled into retirement – at least until the test results prove it's benign.

Some community members, including Costa and Philip Fradkin, are urging school officials to suspend use of the gymnasium entirely until conclusive information is garnered from the air tests.

"It's self evident that there's serious questions about the floor being unhealthy, not only for adults but much more so for young children who are more sensitive," said Fradkin.

Others have called for treating the symptoms now, rather than spending time or money to pinpoint the cause. "I believe that the easiest way to remedy the situation is to 'seal' in whatever is out-gassing – if this is the cause," wrote community member Liza Goldblatt who works in environmental medicine.

Superintendent Rosenthal insisted that if anything harmful is revealed, they will deal with it properly and responsibly.

"In this day and age we can't afford to not pay attention to all the chemicals in the air around us," Hope said, worrying that the effects could be cumulative.

"It's a very inexpensive cost for insuring students' health," Fradkin said.

The issue will be discussed briefly at tonight's school board meeting at Tomales High at 7 p.m., and in more depth on May 15 once additional test results have been received.

amounts of VOCs in the room fell in the "poor" category for home or office exposure. There are no regulations set on total VOC limits.

"There is very little to go on in this report other than to say that more testing should be done to find out or verify the source of the high VOC levels," said James Reyff, an air quality specialist in Sonoma County. "In the first test they just targeted what might come off of a varnish or an adhesive, and it didn't show up. I don't know what's in there causing those high VOC levels – hopefully the next test will find something conclusive."

Reyff added that taking a single sample from a single day left lots of room for error, including possible contamination of the sample from a source outside of the gym. He recommended taking both indoor and outdoor samples, taking samples at different heights above to the floor, and also sending "blank" samples along to the lab that would reveal contamination that could occur en route.

Implications

The air quality report from Dominion recommended that the gym be thoroughly aired out and re-tested to see whether total VOC levels had gone down. It noted that though no odor was noticed in the gym, the inspector did feel dizzy while he was in the room.

No mention is made in the report of ad-