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Do You Live Near a Superfund Site?



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

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Thanks to famous sites like Love Canal, everybody knows that a Superfund site is seriously polluted. But most polluted areas are not famous – there are **more than 1300** Superfund sites on the National Priorities List, and many of them have been waiting for 40 years without much action. Chances are you live close to at least one heavily polluted location.

Most Superfund sites don't get a lot of attention, but they are not secret. You can learn about the Superfund sites near where you live on the EPA website. And if your neighborhood Superfund site isn't getting cleaned up like it should, you can advocate for quicker action.

Love Canal was one of the sites that led to creation of the Superfund program. In the 1940s, a chemical company dumped more than 20,000 tons of hazardous waste on the site of an abandoned canal project and covered it with soil. A residential neighborhood grew up around the site. By the 1970s, water quality reports showed that local ground and surface water was contaminated with multiple toxic chemicals. The situation gained national attention and alerted

communities across the country to the problem of unchecked industrial pollution. In response, Congress established the [Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act \(CERCLA\)](#) in 1980.

Unfunded Superfund

Popularly called “Superfund” CERCLA forces companies responsible for the contamination to either clean it up or reimburse the government for EPA-led cleanup work. When there is no viable responsible party – as when a polluting company has gone out of business – Superfund gives EPA the funds and authority to clean up contaminated sites.

Cleaning up toxic waste is a complicated, expensive process, and Superfund money is not unlimited. In fact, by the early 2000s, the Superfund trust fund had run dry. The taxes established in the 1980s to pay for Superfund cleanups expired in 1995 and party politics blocked their renewal for decades. In the meantime, Superfund listings continued to pile up, even as [climate change increased the risks](#) of contamination spreading through rising water levels, fiercer wildfires, and heavy storms.

In 2021, Congress finally [reinstated the long-lapsed tax](#) on chemical makers that funds Superfund cleanup. The polluter tax will raise \$14.5 billion over the next decade – enough to clean up 49 toxic waste sites. That’s just a tiny fraction of the more than 1300 sites on the list.

Even when a site is funded, clean-up can be little more than a band-aid treatment. It is [not always technically possible](#) to remove toxins from soil and groundwater. Often containment is the best that can be done, and sites are left with use restrictions and continued – although lowered – risks to neighbors. Love Canal was removed from the priorities list in 2004, but much of the area remains uninhabitable and monitoring still continues – alongside [claims](#) that the nearby residents continue to be affected by the toxins.

Superfund Sites Near You

About 7% of Americans live within a mile of a Superfund site, and nearly one in four Americans live within three miles of a Superfund site. [These numbers](#) are higher for communities of color and low-income communities. You can find the locations of the Superfund site or sites nearest your home using the EPA’s online interactive [Superfund National Priorities List](#).

Clicking on a site on the map brings up detailed information about that site, including the [Hazard Ranking System](#) score; when the site was listed; when action was last taken; and whether the site has been delisted, or “deleted.” Clicking on the name of the site will take you to a dedicated web page with more detailed information on the chemicals of concern, the history and clean-up process for the site, possible future uses for the land, and links to photos and supporting documentation.

Opportunities for Involvement

Significantly, Superfund site web pages also provide information on public participation opportunities in the “Stay Updated” menu as well as contact information for the EPA and state or local government staff responsible for the site. If the information about your local Superfund site is confusing or unsatisfying, you can directly contact the EPA program manager responsible for the site to ask for explanations and updates.

For many – possibly most – Superfund sites, nothing is really being done but monitoring. Everyone can call or write to their [elected representatives in Congress](#) to demand more funding and action to clean up Superfund sites. Use the sites in your community as examples in your communications with elected officials.

You can also join community groups that advocate and work towards restoration and redevelopment of polluted properties. For example, in Seattle, which has three Superfund sites concentrated around the industrialized Duwamish River, the nonprofit [Duwamish Alive](#) collaborates with community, municipalities, non-profits and businesses to improve the health of the Duwamish River Watershed.

If there are no local groups working to get Superfund sites cleaned up, start one. The [National Wildlife Foundation's Superfund Redevelopment](#) program works to provide technical assistance to communities around the country that are interested in restoring and reusing formerly contaminated land.



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[Protecting Your Garden In Winter](#)



By [Gemma Alexander](#)

Gemma Alexander has an M.S. in urban horticulture and a backyard filled with native plants. After working in a genetics laboratory and at a landfill, she now writes about the environment, the arts and family. See more of her writing [here](#).

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