

UP Settlement To Help With Lead Paint Issues

OMAHA, Neb. (AP) — Omaha programs focusing on the hazards of lead paint and improving children's health will get a boost from Union Pacific's \$25 million settlement with the Environmental Protection Agency.

Nearly \$12 million of the settlement will support EPA work on lead-paint hazards in Omaha. That includes lead paint remediation work and blood screening of children done by the Douglas County Health Department.

Another \$3.15 million will go to the nonprofit Omaha Healthy Kids Alliance to support a five-year education program about the hazards of lead paint and how homeowners can deal with them.

Nebraska state Sen. Brenda Council, who serves on a community group advising the EPA, said she's glad the settlement focuses on kids' health and lead paint. She says the settlement appears to follow the community group's previous recommendations.

Amtrak Service Disrupted By N.D. Flooding

DEVILS LAKE, N.D. (AP) — Amtrak officials say flooding in separate areas of northern North Dakota has forced a temporary shutdown of passenger rail service between St. Paul, Minn., and Spokane, Wash.

The company said Wednesday two bridges are threatened because of rising water in the Devils Lake basin, and the rail station in Minot was closed after water flooded the basement.

Amtrak has canceled service through Sunday in North Dakota, Montana, Idaho and Minnesota, except in St. Paul. This suspension includes the daily originations of the trains from Portland, Seattle and Chicago, but the company will provide alternate transportation in Washington and Oregon.

"Some of this will depend on the wave action on Devils Lake," said Amtrak spokesman Marc Magliari. "But the local flooding in Minot is an issue, even if the wind settles down on Devils Lake."

BNSF Railway owns the tracks on which Amtrak's Empire Builder line runs. Magliari said railway officials are inspecting the bridges and rail bed near Churchs Ferry.

About 10,000 people living near the Souris River in Minot have been ordered to evacuate, mostly as a precaution. The Souris River runs near the recently renovated Amtrak station in Minot, Magliari said.

"According to what local authorities have told us, the river will overtake the general area of the station sometime later today," he said Wednesday.

Amtrak is refunding fares for canceled service. Tickets hold their cash value for a year, Magliari said.

Nebraska Man Injured In Auger Accident

KEARNEY, Neb. (AP) — A central Nebraska man is recovering after his arm was caught in a grain auger.

The *Kearney Hub* says 29-year-old Brocy Hemmerling, of Gibbon, was working with the auger on a farm north of Kearney Tuesday night when his left arm was caught in the machine.

Emergency crews removed him from the auger and took him to a Kearney hospital, where he remained on Wednesday. The newspaper says Hemmerling was listed in good condition.

Des Moines Hospital Won't Hire Smokers

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — A Des Moines hospital is expanding its smoke-free workplace to its new employees with a tobacco-free hiring policy.

KCCI-TV in Des Moines reports that Mercy Medical Center will no longer hire smokers and will test applicants for nicotine as part of its pre-employment drug testing.

Human Resources Director Kevin Elsberry says the hospital wants its employees to emulate the same healthy behaviors it encourages from its patients. The policy, which goes into July 1, doesn't affect current employees.

Elsberry says the policy isn't discriminatory. He says smokers aren't a "protected class" in Iowa so the hospital has the option of not hiring people who smoke or use other tobacco products.

Mercy banned smoking from its campus about five years ago.

Sandbaggers Given T-shirts For Overnight Shifts

BISMARCK, N.D. (AP) — A group from Bismarck and Mandan is offering T-shirts to people who volunteer for an all-night sandbagging effort.

Bismarck-Mandan Chamber of Commerce president Kelvin Hullet told *The Bismarck Tribune* Wednesday that about 240 volunteers are needed to work overnight shifts at two separate sandbag-filling sites. The shifts run from 10 p.m. to 2:30 a.m. and 2:30 to 7 a.m.

Hullet says the goal is to make 250,000 sandbags. The first 50 people at each location for each shift will receive a "Race to Sunrise" T-shirt.

North Dakota's Garrison Dam opened its emergency spillway gates for the first time Wednesday, and the Missouri River is expected to rise for the next several days.

Bismarck-Mandan officials hope to complete more than 10 miles of dikes by the weekend.

S.D. Youth Eligible For New Health Insurance

PIERRE (AP) — South Dakota residents under the age of 19 will be eligible to sign up for health insurance regardless of their health condition.

State insurance officials say the open enrollment period runs from July 1 through Aug. 14.

The new program requires companies who offer individual health insurance to provide the option.

Officials say people who have individual health insurance plans with an exclusionary rider will be offered a policy without a rider or exclusion during this period.

First Crop Of Worker Layoff Notices Delayed

ST. PAUL, Minn. (AP) — About 800 state workers who were expecting layoff notices this week in preparation for a possible state government shutdown are getting a nine-day reprieve.

The Minnesota Management and Budget office says it reached an agreement with the Minnesota Law Enforcement Association to delay layoff notices that were to be sent Wednesday to State Patrol troopers, conservation officers, and Bureau of Criminal Apprehension officers.

Instead the notices will go out on June 10, the same day they'll be sent to another roughly 35,000 state employees.

The layoffs will come if a new two-year state budget is not in place by July 1, though some employees will likely be deemed essential. The shutdown is looming thanks to an impasse between Democratic Gov. Mark Dayton and Republican legislative majorities over taxes and spending.

S.D. Death Row Inmate Questions Drug Quality

SIOUX FALLS (AP) — South Dakota's purchase of a lethal injection drug from India last month might further delay the execution of a man who raped and killed a 9-year-old Sioux Falls girl in 1990.

The *Argus Leader* says recent court filings in an appeal from death row inmate Donald Moeller question the quality of the sodium thiopental South Dakota bought from a company in India.

A similar appeal scuttled the scheduled execution of Nebraska death row inmate Carey Dean Moore, when that state's Supreme Court issued a stay of execution last week. Moore was to die June 14.

South Dakota Attorney General Marty Jackley says he thinks the quality and reliability of South Dakota's batch of the drug will stand up to scrutiny. He says it's been independently tested.

Omaha Mayor Signs Flood Declaration

BY TIMBERLY ROSS
Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. — Omaha Mayor Jim Suttle signed an emergency declaration Wednesday as the city contends with the swollen Missouri River but he and others said they expect to escape major flooding.

"We're on top of this," said Suttle, noting the declaration will help the city get state and federal aid should it be needed.

Officials in Nebraska and Iowa have been monitoring the river, which is expected to crest near Omaha at record levels between 34 and 36 feet in late June after more water is released from reservoirs in North Dakota and South Dakota.

The river serves as the city's eastern border. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers measured the river at about 30 feet Wednesday in Omaha. Flood stage is 29 feet.

Col. Robert Ruch with the Army Corps of Engineers said Omaha has a 42-foot levee, and he's confident it will protect the city.

"We have a lot of room to work with here," he said.

Ruch said he has no concerns about its structural integrity, and city workers have been inspecting it every day to make sure it's in good condition.

Suttle said the city will have flood pumps on standby should there be heavy rains that leave water trapped on the dry side of the levy. He declined to give a worst-case scenario for flooding, saying the city has a great flood plan.

Also Wednesday, the city activated a command center to handle flood-related issues and was preparing to activate 211 as a resource for residents with flooding questions.

Water has already spilled over the banks in several low-lying areas along the river in Nebraska and Iowa. That means more than 1,000 acres of farmland in southeast Nebraska have flooded, and water is encroaching on cities such as Fort Calhoun, Neb., and Sloan, Iowa.

The corps predicts that 2011 could be one of the wettest years on record in the Missouri River basin. Officials are predicting record river flows and large releases from upstream reservoirs because of steady spring rain and above-normal snowpack.

The corps warns that the high water level and flooding issues will likely worsen over the next month as releases from upstream reservoirs reach historic levels.

Branstad To Check On Flooding In Iowa

DES MOINES, Iowa (AP) — Gov. Terry Branstad is heading for western Iowa to check on flood readiness along the Missouri River.

Branstad will be joined by Derek Hill of Iowa Homeland Security and Emergency Management in Sioux City on Thursday.

They'll check on sandbagging efforts and will hold a news conference with local officials on flood preparations and response.

The swollen river is rolling downstream from the Northern Plains, affecting cities and towns from North Dakota to Iowa and Nebraska. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers is increasing releases from the six dams on the Missouri River to drain water from record rains the past few weeks.

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