

I. Background

A. What Are CERCLA and SARA?

In 1980, Congress enacted the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act, 42 U.S.C. 9601–9675 (“CERCLA” or “the Act”), in response to the dangers of uncontrolled releases of hazardous substances. CERCLA was amended on October 17, 1986, by the Superfund Amendments and Reauthorization Act (“SARA”), Public Law 99–499, 100 Stat. 1613 *et seq.*

B. What Is the NCP?

To implement CERCLA, EPA promulgated the revised National Oil and Hazardous Substances Pollution Contingency Plan (“NCP”), 40 CFR part 300, on July 16, 1982 (47 FR 31180), pursuant to CERCLA section 105 and Executive Order 12316 (46 FR 42237, August 20, 1981). The NCP sets guidelines and procedures for responding to releases and threatened releases of hazardous substances, pollutants, or contaminants under CERCLA. EPA has revised the NCP on several occasions. The most recent comprehensive revision was on March 8, 1990 (55 FR 8666).

As required under section 105(a)(8)(A) of CERCLA, the NCP also includes “criteria for determining priorities among releases or threatened releases throughout the United States for the purpose of taking remedial action and, to the extent practicable, taking into account the potential urgency of such action for the purpose of taking removal action.” (“Removal” actions are defined broadly and include a wide range of actions taken to study, clean up, prevent or otherwise address releases and threatened releases 42 U.S.C. 9601(23).)

C. What Is the National Priorities List (NPL)?

The NPL is a list of national priorities among the known or threatened releases of hazardous substances, pollutants, or contaminants throughout the United States. The list, which is appendix B of the NCP (40 CFR part 300), was required under section 105(a)(8)(B) of CERCLA, as amended by SARA. Section 105(a)(8)(B) defines the NPL as a list of “releases” and the highest priority “facilities” and requires that the NPL be revised at least annually. The NPL is intended primarily to guide EPA in determining which sites warrant further investigation to assess the nature and extent of public health and environmental risks associated with a release of hazardous substances. The NPL is only of limited significance,

however, as it does not assign liability to any party or to the owner of any specific property. Neither does placing a site on the NPL mean that any remedial or removal action necessarily need be taken.

For purposes of listing, the NPL includes two sections, one of sites that are generally evaluated and cleaned up by EPA (the “General Superfund Section”), and one of sites that are owned or operated by other Federal agencies (the “Federal Facilities Section”). With respect to sites in the Federal Facilities Section, these sites are generally being addressed by other Federal agencies. Under Executive Order 12580 (52 FR 2923, January 29, 1987) and CERCLA section 120, each Federal agency is responsible for carrying out most response actions at facilities under its own jurisdiction, custody, or control, although EPA is responsible for preparing an HRS score and determining whether the facility is placed on the NPL. EPA generally is not the lead agency at Federal Facilities Section sites, and its role at such sites is accordingly less extensive than at other sites.

D. How Are Sites Listed on the NPL?

There are three mechanisms for placing sites on the NPL for possible remedial action (see 40 CFR 300.425(c) of the NCP): (1) A site may be included on the NPL if it scores sufficiently high on the Hazard Ranking System (“HRS”), which EPA promulgated as appendix A of the NCP (40 CFR part 300). The HRS serves as a screening device to evaluate the relative potential of uncontrolled hazardous substances to pose a threat to human health or the environment. On December 14, 1990 (55 FR 51532), EPA promulgated revisions to the HRS partly in response to CERCLA section 105(c), added by SARA. The revised HRS evaluates four pathways: Ground water, surface water, soil exposure, and air. As a matter of Agency policy, those sites that score 28.50 or greater on the HRS are eligible for the NPL; (2) Each State may designate a single site as its top priority to be listed on the NPL, regardless of the HRS score. This mechanism, provided by the NCP at 40 CFR 300.425(c)(2) requires that, to the extent practicable, the NPL include within the 100 highest priorities, one facility designated by each State representing the greatest danger to public health, welfare, or the environment among known facilities in the State (see 42 U.S.C. 9605(a)(8)(B)); (3) The third mechanism for listing, included in the NCP at 40 CFR 300.425(c)(3), allows certain sites to be

listed regardless of their HRS score, if all of the following conditions are met:

- The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) of the U.S. Public Health Service has issued a health advisory that recommends dissociation of individuals from the release.
- EPA determines that the release poses a significant threat to public health.
- EPA anticipates that it will be more cost-effective to use its remedial authority than to use its removal authority to respond to the release.

EPA promulgated an original NPL of 406 sites on September 8, 1983 (48 FR 40658). The NPL has been expanded since then, most recently on April 30, 2003 (68 FR 23077).

E. What Happens to Sites on the NPL?

A site may undergo remedial action financed by the Trust Fund established under CERCLA (commonly referred to as the “Superfund”) only after it is placed on the NPL, as provided in the NCP at 40 CFR 300.425(b)(1). (“Remedial actions” are those “consistent with permanent remedy, taken instead of or in addition to removal actions * * *,” 42 U.S.C. 9601(24).) However, under 40 CFR 300.425(b)(2) placing a site on the NPL “does not imply that monies will be expended.” EPA may pursue other appropriate authorities to respond to the releases, including enforcement action under CERCLA and other laws.

F. How Are Site Boundaries Defined?

The NPL does not describe releases in precise geographical terms; it would be neither feasible nor consistent with the limited purpose of the NPL (to identify releases that are priorities for further evaluation), for it to do so.

Although a CERCLA “facility” is broadly defined to include any area where a hazardous substance release has “come to be located” (CERCLA section 101(9)), the listing process itself is not intended to define or reflect the boundaries of such facilities or releases. Of course, HRS data (if the HRS is used to list a site) upon which the NPL placement was based will, to some extent, describe the release(s) at issue. That is, the NPL site would include all releases evaluated as part of that HRS analysis.

When a site is listed, the approach generally used to describe the relevant release(s) is to delineate a geographical area (usually the area within an installation or plant boundaries) and identify the site by reference to that area. As a legal matter, the site is not coextensive with that area, and the