

Researchers unearthing Iqaluit's mystery stink

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Two toxicology students from the University of Saskatchewan are about to dig up one of Iqaluit's dirtier secrets — the source of a horrible smell coming from the soil in the city's Lower Base area.

PhD toxicology candidates Alexis Schafer and Brian Laird will spend the next three weeks collecting 300 soil samples from around the Lower Base area to find out how much fuel has contaminated the ground.

"We're going to look at the levels of petroleum hydrocarbons and different metals within the soil," Schafer told CBC News on Tuesday, adding that Laird will also investigate whether the fuel presents any health risks.

The researchers are obtaining permission from all residents in the area before they start digging.

Contractors digging trenches for new water and sewer lines in 2005 unearthed old fuel spills in the ground. The fumes that came from oily puddles in the soil gave some of the construction workers headaches and sore throats.

At the time, the federal Indian and Northern Affairs Department and Nunavut's Environment Department collected soil samples for testing. Still, Iqaluit residents do not know where the oil came from or who put it there.

"Along the way, someone will make an educated guess about what year this piece of garbage or whatever is in there, where it came from, what date and then who is responsible," said Maurice Guimond, an environmental technician with the Nunavut Power Corp. who is helping the researchers navigate Iqaluit.

The researchers are getting help from the Nunavut Power Corp., the territorial Environment Department and the Nunavut Research Institute. The City of Iqaluit has loaned Schafer and Laird a drilling truck.

"Our hope is not to just come in and find out what's there, but to put in place some remediation action," Schafer said.

Depending on their findings, which they expect to have in six months, that remediation action could take the form of covering up the spilled fuel or installing a barrier that would trap any old fuel washing toward the ocean.