



- [Calendars](#)
- [Classifieds](#)
- [Forums](#)
- [Sports](#)
- [Weather](#)
- [Yellow Pages](#)

- [Home](#)
-
- Tampa Bay columnists**
[Mary Jo Melone](#)
[Howard Troxler](#)

- News Sections**
[Action](#)
[Arts & Entertainment](#)
[Business](#)
[Citrus County](#)
[Columnists](#)
[Floridian](#)
[Hernando County](#)
[Obituaries](#)
[Opinion](#)
[Pasco County](#)
[State](#)
[Tampa Bay](#)
[World & Nation](#)

- Featured areas**
[AP The Wire](#)
[Alive!](#)
[Area Guide](#)
[Auto](#)
[A-Z Index](#)
[Classifieds](#)
[Comics & Games](#)
[Employment](#)
[Health](#)
[Forums](#)
[Lottery](#)
[Movies](#)
[Police Report](#)
[Real Estate](#)

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Stauffer ombudsman 'back in business'

With additional federal funding approved, a June 5 Tarpon Springs hearing into the cleanup plan is confirmed.

By ROBERT FARLEY

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The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency designated an additional \$150,000 for its ombudsman's office Monday, ending a controversy that one official said threatened to derail the office's investigation of the Stauffer Superfund site in North Pinellas.

EPA Ombudsman Bob Martin, who decided in December to investigate the EPA's activities at Stauffer, is seen as a savior by many local residents critical of EPA's proposed cleanup plan at the site.

In two hearings initiated by the ombudsman's office, Martin and his lead investigator, Hugh Kaufman, grilled EPA officials about flaws and shortcomings in the work done so far at the 130-acre toxic waste site, which once held a phosphorus processing plant.

The EPA's cleanup plan for the site, awaiting approval in federal court in what is called a consent decree, calls for piling and capping 300,000 cubic yards of toxic soil on the land on the Pinellas-Pasco line. The soil is contaminated with a variety of

- Headlines**
- [Battle lines forming in downtown debate](#)
 - [Stauffer ombudsman 'back in business'](#)
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 - [Largo school slashes suspension rate](#)
 - [Canopy carpools could be banned](#)
 - [New deal on meals is a cool option](#)
 - [Revising development code will spawn more problems](#)
 - [Class of 2000](#)



[Sports](#)
[Stocks](#)
[Weather](#)
[What's New](#)
[Wheelfinder](#)

Weekly Sections

[Home & Garden](#)
[Perspective](#)
[Taste](#)
[Tech Times](#)
[Travel](#)
[Weekend](#)

Other Sections

[Buccaneers](#)
[College Football](#)
[Devil Rays](#)
[Lightning](#)
[Ongoing Stories](#)
[Photo Reprints](#)
[Photo Review](#)
[Seniority](#)
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chemicals and radioactive elements.

Among the concerns raised by Kaufman is the possibility that sinkholes could develop under the mounded soil, causing a collapse that could send contaminants into the area's drinking water.

Last month, the EPA offered an amended consent decree which outlines geophysical studies to test for the possibility of sinkholes and proposes tougher standards for cleanup of arsenic in the soil. In a letter outlining the changes, EPA project manager John Blanchard stated the revisions were based on negotiations that began as part of the ombudsman's hearings.

A third ombudsman's hearing was set for June 5 in Tarpon Springs to discuss the amendments to the consent decree. But last week, Kaufman warned his office might not be able to attend.

Kaufman said the ombudsman's office was directed by Vice President Al Gore and two Democratic representatives to expedite investigation of a hazardous waste incinerator in Ohio.

While the ombudsman's office was provided \$50,000 over its annual \$300,000 budget to do the additional task, Kaufman said it would take \$150,000 more. A memo from Michael Shapiro, an EPA deputy assistant administrator, was not encouraging that the extra money would be forthcoming.

"I doubt we have anywhere near this level of resources available," Shapiro wrote. "I will set up a meeting to discuss your support needs."

Kaufman said without the funding, the ombudsman's office could not continue its investigation of a half-dozen other sites around the country, including Stauffer. Kaufman suggested politics was at play, since all the other projects were being done at the behest of Republican congressmen.

Several representatives, including U.S. Rep. Mike Bilirakis, R-Palm Harbor, intervened, arguing the extra funding was critical.

On Monday, the ombudsman's request for the \$150,000 was granted. Timothy Field Jr., assistant administrator for the Office of Solid Waste and Emergency Response, said it had nothing to

do with Kaufman's cries of political interference. Field said he told Kaufman last week that a final decision would be made Monday, but that Kaufman decided to turn the issue into a national publicity stunt.

Field believes Kaufman was angling for a larger ombudsman's budget down the road.

"I'm sure that's part of the game here," Field said. "It is very clear that Mr. Kaufman was making reckless statements that he doesn't have substantiation for."

On Monday, Kaufman said that with funding in place, "We're back in business."

That means the June 5 hearing is back on and will be held from 4 to 6 p.m. in Tarpon Springs City Hall, 324 E Pine St. Expected are representatives from the EPA, the Florida Department of Environmental Protection, the Justice Department and the ombudsman for the federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.

Kaufman said he wants to hear from state and EPA officials, as well as Stauffer representatives, to answer the question: "Has the consent decree gone far enough to fulfill the flaws identified by the process in the last two hearings?"

Heather Malinowski, secretary of Pi-Pa-TAG, a local citizens watchdog group, said that while the amended consent decree is an improvement, it does not satisfy her group's concerns.

"It doesn't substantiate the (cleanup) decision they've made," she said.

Malinowski and other Pi-Pa-Tag members want the sinkhole and water studies done first, before a consent decree that defines the cleanup method is signed. EPA officials argue the tests should be performed after the consent decree is signed, to keep the process moving.



[Back to North Pinellas news](#)

**BACK
TO TOP**

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