



# A Citizen's Guide to Capping

## The Citizen's Guide Series

EPA uses many methods to clean up pollution at Superfund and other sites. If you live, work, or go to school near a Superfund site, you may want to learn more about these methods. Perhaps they are being used or are proposed for use at your site. How do they work? Are they safe? This Citizen's Guide is one in a series to help answer your questions.

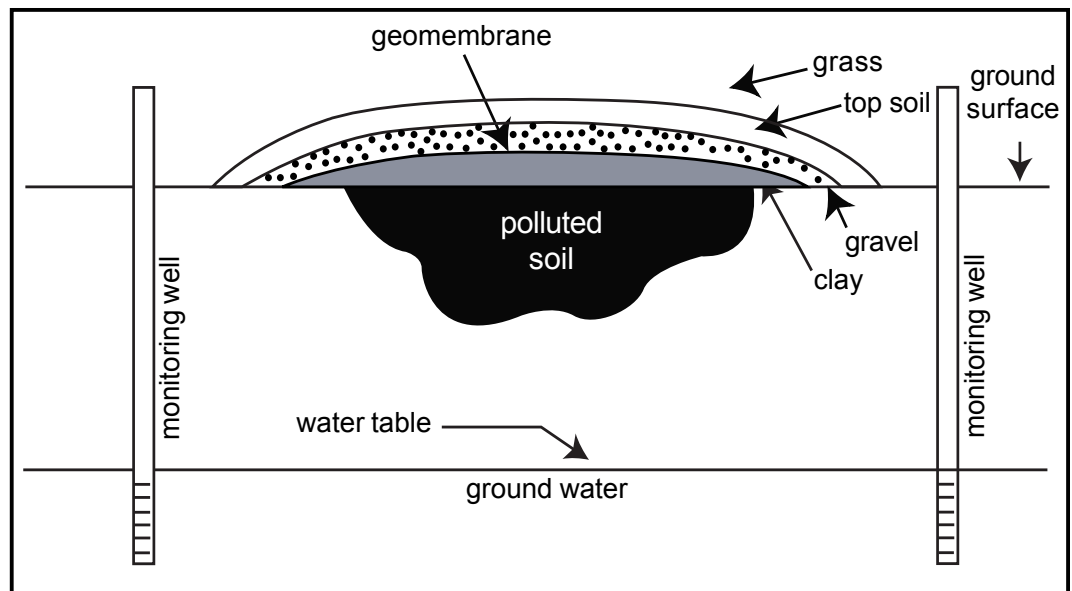
### What Is capping?

Capping involves placing a cover over contaminated material such as the waste buried at a landfill. Such covers are called "caps." Caps do not clean up the contaminated material. They just keep it in place so it will not come into contact with people or the environment.

### How does it work?

Sometimes digging up and removing contaminated material can be difficult or expensive. Instead, a cap will be placed over it to keep it in place. A cap works in three main ways:

- 1) It stops rainwater from seeping through the hazardous material and carrying the pollution into the groundwater, lakes or rivers.
- 2) It stops wind from blowing away the hazardous material.
- 3) It keeps people and animals from coming into contact with the contaminated material and tracking it off the site.



Constructing a cap can be as simple as placing a single layer of asphalt on top of the contaminated material. More often, however, caps are made of several layers. The top layer at the ground surface is usually soil with grass or other plants. Plants take up rainwater with their roots and help prevent it from soaking down into the next layer. They also keep the topsoil from eroding. The second layer down drains any water that comes through the first layer. It is usually constructed of gravel and pipes. A third layer may be added to control gasses that come from the hazardous material. The bottom layer lies directly on the contaminated material. It is usually made of clay. The clay is covered by a sheet of strong synthetic material called a *geomembrane*. Together the clay and the geomembrane help stop further flow of water downward.

## Is capping safe?

When properly built and maintained, a cap is a safe method for keeping contaminated material in place. A cap will continue to work safely as long as it is not broken or eroded. Regular inspections are made to make sure that the weather, plant roots or some human activity have not damaged the cap. Also, groundwater monitoring wells are placed around the edges of the cap so that any leakage from the site can be found and fixed.

## How long will it take?

Building a cap can take a few days up to several months.

The length of time depends on several factors that vary from site to site:

- size of the area
- thickness and design of the cap
- availability of clean topsoil and clay

Caps can be effective for many years as long as they are properly maintained.



## For more information

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(703) 603-9910.

Further information also  
can be obtained at  
[www.cluin.org](http://www.cluin.org) or  
[www.epa.gov/  
superfund/sites](http://www.epa.gov/superfund/sites).

## Why use capping?

Caps have been used at hundreds of sites because they are an effective method for keeping wastes contained. Caps are usually only part of a cleanup remedy. Often they are used with pump and treat systems (See *A Citizen's Guide to Pump and Treat* [EPA 542-01-025]). The pumping and treating cleans up polluted groundwater, while the cap prevents contaminated materials from reaching the groundwater.

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