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Picher residents hear corps plan for study  
Group asks for push for governor's backing  
By Gary Garton  
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PICHER, Okla. — Gov. Frank Keating is being asked to give priority to state matching money for a study by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to find a "holistic approach" to solving the Tar Creek environmental problems.

"Yard remediation by the Environmental Protection Agency isn't enough, and if necessary, the state should withhold any more money for that and fund the corps study," John Sparkman told a large audience of area residents Monday night.

Sparkman's Tar Creek Basin Advisory Committee had the Corps of Engineers review its study plan for a meeting at Picher High School.

The local committee has advocated a property buyout in the Picher-Cardin area by the federal government and creation of a wetlands to address the lead pollution problem.

Sparkman said he and his group are not "fanatics" about the buyout and wetlands proposal that was suggested by Keating's Tar Creek Task Force last year.

"We need to approach every element of this problem and find a solution that works for every different aspect of the pollution," he said.

U.S. Rep. Brad Carson has obtained congressional approval for \$300,000 to start a feasibility study by the Corps of Engineers addressing all the lead contamination issues. Oklahoma must provide an equal amount in matching money or "in-kind" services via state and local governmental agencies.

Gene Lilly, with the Tulsa office of the corps, said the agency "is not going to try to reinvent the wheel." He said the corps is going over studies of problems in the Neosho River and Grand River watersheds dating to 1985.

"We will not try to duplicate work that has already been done," he said. "We will use it to build on for the development of a comprehensive plan."

Once Oklahoma has approved the matching funds, Lilly said, the corps has a six-month deadline to come up with a strategy for approaching the Tar Creek study. After that, he said, it will take two to three years to develop a complete plan of action.

"It will be a flexible plan based on the concept of adaptive management," he said. "We're not going to present a final answer to all the questions, but rather the means and actions needed to approach the problems. That can change as we go and learn more."

Lilly said the corps hopes to work out a cost-sharing agreement with the state this spring so the first six-month phase can start.

"The \$600,000 being used to start the work is not going to be all the funding it needs," he said. "We have to have a cost-sharing agreement with the state rather than a one-time commitment to one amount."

Sparkman's group distributed letters to the audience calling on Keating to give the corps study the highest priority for state attention. The state still has not approved \$3.5 million in matching funds for the EPA's soil cleanup that has focused on residential yards and other public areas. That agency is continuing to work only on federal trust or Indian land.

Sparkman said members of the White House Council on Environmental Affairs will visit the Picher area Jan. 28-29 to tour Tar Creek.

Both he and Lilly said a series of public meetings would accompany a corps study to obtain local views on the issues involved.

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