

Federal team asked to help children

By Randy Petersen
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The federal technical team left Ottawa County Wednesday after a second day of local meetings to discuss the Tar Creek Superfund site, an area many had never seen before Tuesday.

"I got to see a site I had only heard about for so many years," said Joann Griffith, the Environmental Protection Agency representative who lead Wednesday's private meetings between the technical team, state representatives and area tribal members.

While the team left, Griffith said the work will continue in Washington, D.C., in an effort to find the best solution for the area and its residents.

"I certainly feel there is a big job here," she said. "It's one of the biggest jobs I can imagine."

Griffith said she understands the ball is in the federal team's court and that the group must work together to find a solution.

At the same time, local residents told the team that it's important to remember the area's youngest residents.

During one presentation, Picher-Cardin Schools Superintendent Bob Walker and Elementary School Principal Kim Pace told the team how the lead contamination has had an impact on local education.

In a school study, teachers and administrators compared blood-lead levels of 28 students with their reading ability.

Walker said the higher the lead level, the more a student struggles with reading.

While the district has implemented new programs to reach children struggling with reading skills, Walker said six of the 28 tested are still having problems.

"We're encountering kids who are hitting a wall," he said. "That's frustrating for them and it's frustrating for our teachers."

While noting there are many reasons children struggle in school, Walker said the fault can't be placed on the students.

"We're not here to whine or complain about our kids," he told the federal representatives. "We have some good kids."

Pace echoed the comment, noting the school is committed to creating "world-class citizens," a twist of the world-class wetlands concept the federal team is studying.

Still, she said she has seen an increase in learning disabilities in the district since she started teaching.

"We can't prove the lead is the cause of everything, but we can't rule it out," said Pace, a Picher native. "Who knows what my potential could have been if I hadn't been exposed to lead."

Mayor Sam Freeman echoed the concern for the children of the area, noting the decision made by the federal team could have an impact on future generations.

Noting yard remediation has made progress in the fight to lower blood-lead levels, Freeman said it hasn't been as drastic as hoped. He also noted the remediation only covers part of the problem caused by former mining.

The mayor said keeping the need to help children in the forefront of efforts should provide motivation to continue the work.

"Along with helping the children, hopefully they will help the adults, too," he said.

Oklahoma Secretary of Environment Brian C. Griffin said it's crucial that the work continue with a focus on what is best for the children of Picher, Cardin and the surrounding area.

"We can never, never lose sight of the fact that we're dealing with lives and we're dealing with children's lives," Griffin said.

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