

**Tar Creek money remains on hold**  
**State budget shortfall ties up federal funding**  
**By Gary Garton**  
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PICHER, Okla. — With Oklahoma's governor and Legislature deadlocked over releasing "rainy day" money to meet a serious budget shortfall, federal funding for two projects in the Tar Creek Superfund site remains on hold.

Oklahoma must provide \$3.5 million in matching funds to continue soil cleanup work by the Environmental Protection Agency's contractor.

Work is continuing on Indian land properties in the Superfund area, but non-Indian homeowners cannot be helped until the state match is approved.

The state also must pay \$300,000 in matching money to start a U.S. Army Corps of Engineers feasibility study for a wetlands project that would include a buyout of land in Picher and Cardin.

John Sparkman of Picher, organizer of the Tar Creek Basin Advisory Committee, said his group will meet Wednesday in Tulsa with U.S. Sen. Don Nickles to discuss alternative federal funding sources for area projects.

"It's not fair for them to keep this hanging over our heads because of a bureaucratic gridlock in Oklahoma City," Sparkman said.

He said Nickles asked for the meeting with the group, which is composed of volunteer residents who came together originally to back the proposal to buy out and move Picher and Cardin to another location.

"We're trying to address a wide range of issues and not just the buyout," Sparkman said. "The people in this area have lived with this lead problem long enough without any real relief."

Sparkman said representatives of his committee will ask Nickles to explore alternative funding sources or ways to free up federally allocated money while the Oklahoma budget crisis continues.

State Rep. Larry Roberts of Miami and J.D. Strong, chief of staff for the state secretary of the environment, agreed in separate telephone interviews that the state funds are still in limbo.

"The state's \$350 million budget shortfall is forcing reconsideration of a lot of priorities," Roberts said.

He said the state's "rainy day fund" is drawing the most attention from state agencies.

"The Department of Corrections alone is asking for \$30 million, and the Department of Education needs 1 percent of its total budget to make up cuts in state aid to school districts this year alone," Roberts said.

Because of a state balanced-budget law, the 2003 budget must be locked in before the Legislature adjourns May 31.

"Everything is still up for negotiation right now," Roberts said.

Strong said there are alternatives to the "rainy day fund," but he agreed with Roberts that it is the only likely source of any major funding.

"Once they get the 2003 budget finalized, they can tell a little more about what's going to be left for any supplemental funding this year," Strong said. "We could still get some of the matching funds, but the debate is going to go right down to the wire."

Sparkman said his group also is expecting a report from a White House Council on the Environment tour of the Tar Creek site in January.

"That's due this coming month, and we hope it will give some impetus to the solutions for the problems here," he said.