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**Consultant critical of EPA's lead cleanup for Tar Creek work
Local activists planning showdown with officials
By Gary Garton
Globe Staff Writer**

MIAMI, Okla. — The Environmental Protection Agency "isn't even trying" to solve the complex problems in the Tar Creek Superfund site, a consultant on Wednesday told a local environmental group that hired him.

The local activists plan to demand a showdown meeting with EPA officials to review the overall situation.

Gary Lawley spoke with local residents Wednesday at the Miami Civic Center. He is a consultant with a doctorate in environmental science and 30 years of experience working with pollution problems around the United States, including a dozen EPA Superfund sites.

Lawley said: "An official with the Region 6 office at Dallas told me in confidence they aren't going to try to solve all the problems because they don't have the money. He said they're not going to put all their eggs in the Tar Creek basket."

An EPA response to Lawley's criticisms was not available Wednesday night.

A local group, Local Environmental Action Demanded, hired Lawley to sort through the studies, findings of record and other documentation generated in 23 years of the Tar Creek site's history. It is using money from an EPA grant to finance the work.

"Two things tell me you're not getting the full force of the EPA's efforts here," he said. "First, an entire generation has passed with very little visible results. Second, they've never even generated a comprehensive map of the entire site that would point out all the different problems that have to be addressed."

Funding for any comprehensive Tar Creek solution, he said, will have to come through a special congressional appropriation, rather than a federal agency budget allocation.

"The EPA and the six or seven mining companies listed as potentially responsible parties in this area are fighting each other in court over additional money for the work," he said. "The PRPs would rather spend

their money on lawyers than solving the problem, and the EPA would rather focus on the legal issues than the environmental ones they're not going to be able to solve."

In his analysis of Tar Creek documentation so far, Lawley agreed with members of the group that "there has been a lot of duplication of effort. There is enough documentation to cover a 10-foot-long bookshelf, but I could condense it all into one about 4 feet in length. A lot of the reports incorporate other reports and are then incorporated, in turn, into new reports.

"Basically, you have to take control of the situation locally and remember these 'operable units' the EPA talks about are really contracts with you, the public. They've been telling you what they will do but not paying attention to what you want done."

He said the EPA maintains a practice at public hearings on each new phase of the cleanup work in which a list of alternatives is given the public, ranging from no action up to the most expensive option.

"I will guarantee you they sit down there in Dallas and rehearse ways to guide your questions and their answers toward the option they want you to choose, because it's what is best for them, not for you," he said.

Jess McKibben and Ed Rodgers, two residents of the Tar Creek area, said they'd like to see the EPA do a pilot project on injecting a slurry of chat and fly ash into the mines.

"They're already shoving chat back in the mines in Missouri," McKibben said. "Dr. John Micka, a chemistry professor at Northeastern A&M College here, proved years ago that fly ash will cause the heavy metals to settle out of contaminated mine water. They didn't want to listen to him."

Rodgers, who owns Indian trust land on which there are large reserves of chat, said the EPA proposal to move the mine tailings out of the area by selling them is impractical.

"I'd like to make some money off that stuff, but the reality is that there is no market for it now," he said. "The big companies that used to buy from us before the Bureau of Indian Affairs moratorium on selling chat have found other sources and invested in using them."

Rebecca Jim, founder of the local environmental group, said that in all of the regional cleanup work by EPA, its Region 6 and Region 7 have shown no evidence of cooperating. "I want to get them together and find out why," she said.

Jim said she will take the initiative in asking the related agencies for a meeting with the public.

Lawley said he is available as a consultant "for anyone in the area who has concerns about the environmental problems related to lead. I was hired by the LEAD agency, but they want me to help anyone who has questions, or would like to address a formal complaint or suggestion to the EPA."

Lawley said he may be reached at (580) 371-5353 or via e-mail at