

Federal experts tour Superfund site

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A technical team of federal employees were given their first glimpse of the challenge ahead of them as they climbed a chat pile and skirted around mine shafts Tuesday.

Members of President's Council on Environmental Quality toured the Tar Creek Superfund Site as part of their first meeting to discuss the proposed world-class wetlands project. The project, first proposed by the Governor's Tar Creek Task Force, would turn Picher and Cardin into a wetland recreational area.

Joann Griffith, a representative of the Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund office in Washington, said talking about the project and seeing what the team faces are two different things.

"The pictures I have back in Washington do not do this area justice," she said after the tour. "It just brought home how big of a problem — how big of a site this truly is."

Griffith is leading the team composed of EPA technicians, as well as experts from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Bureau of Indian Affairs and the Army Corps of Engineers.

Tuesday's meeting and tours provided the first connection to the project for many participants. It also allowed the federal team members to mingle with state, local and tribal officials.

At one point, Tuesday's tour took technical team members to the top of a Picher chat pile for a bird's-eye view of the area riddled with more than 1,000 open mine shafts, cave-ins, other subsidence concerns and chat piles.

"75 million tons of chat ... enough to pave a four-lane interstate highway twice around the globe," said Brian C. Griffin, Oklahoma secretary of environment.

Area tribal leaders echoed the concerns of Wyandotte Chief Leaford Bearskin who met Griffin and the technical team with the challenge of remembering residents on the south side of the county as they work to improve Oklahoma's northeast corner.

"People should be the top priority," Bearskin said. "We are not talking about bugs or hoot owls. These are people — moms, dads and grandpas."

John Sparkman, chairman of the Tar Creek Basin Steering Committee, led a portion of Tuesday's group through the tour and encouraged team members to move quickly on their task.

"You are at ground zero — the epicenter of the mines" Sparkman said. "As we sit here, we can talk about these issues and we can meet and meet and meet. But, while we sit here and meet, the chat dust is blowing, the ground is falling in and acid mine water is spilling into Tar Creek so we need to get on with things."

Griffin said he feels Tuesday's meeting does just that.

"I think it moves it forward significantly," he said.

While the EPA has been constricted in its scope as a Superfund site manager, the other federal

agencies will allow the work to grow and address all problems seen in the former mining area.

Griffin restated his commitment to the wetlands concept, stating he sees it as the only viable solution that covers all the needs.

“We believe the only comprehensive solution is the use of world-class wetlands in combination with a large tall grass prairie reserve and a comprehensive natural resource area,” Griffin said.

While some proposals will solve one or more problems, he said none have offered a complete solution.

“We feel this area deserves to be addressed in a complete fashion,” he said.

Several local participants said they thought Tuesday’s effort was a step in the right direction.

“I think it means we may get some answers and solution options in a relatively short period of time,” Picher Mayor Sam Freeman said, noting he hopes first reports will be seen in six months.

Freeman said he also was happy to see the participation of many local residents with the state and federal representatives.

“I’m elated at the turnout we had,” he said.

With high interest, he said he hopes the momentum remains intact.

“Each one of those people here today has been handed a great task,” he said, noting the goal is to help the children of the area by reducing the threat of lead contamination.

High blood-lead levels have been cited as the source of illness and learning problems in the Superfund area.

“Along with helping the children, hopefully they will help the adults, too,” Freeman said.

Ed Keheley, a member of the governor’s task force, said he saw good interaction between the technical team and local residents and feels that will benefit the continued study of the wetlands proposal.

“I feel comfortable with it,” he said.

Keheley said he feels the key will be finding a way to implement the plan with existing technology.

Earl Hatley, president of LEAD Agency, a local citizens environmental group, said he’s glad to see the increased attention for the Superfund site. At the same time, he said he hopes the technicians move carefully and realize how complex the local problems are.

“There are a lot of environmental issues that need to be studied,” he said, noting changes in water levels in the Picher-Cardin area can have a large impact elsewhere.

“Can you have a world-class wetland if the bottom is covered in chat?” he asked as an example of questions that need more study.

Other questions include how chat will be removed, how Quapaw Tribe members will be paid for the chat they own and how Native American cultural practices could be affected by any changes.

Freeman also said he wants to see all area residents protected.

"It's not just Picher and Cardin, but the whole community," he said.

Because of that, the Picher mayor voiced hope that yard remediation efforts will continue, noting work is being done outside of the areas that could be covered by the proposed wetlands.

In addition to touring the Tar Creek area, the technical team toured the Kansas Mined Land Wildlife Area to see what has been done in the past.

Wednesday, the team will meet with state, local and tribal officials to sketch out plans for future work. The technical team will continue to meet in Washington and possibly locally in upcoming months.

"The key to remember here is this is a technical team," Griffin said.

He noted the policy makers will use information gathered by the federal team. The decision on whether a wetlands project is funded will come later.

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