

7-3-02

Joplin Globe editorial

## **Tar Creek**

**In our view**

The Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund program has been a waste and a blessing. In the Tar Creek Superfund site in Northeast Oklahoma, millions of dollars have been spent over nearly two decades. And yet the problem remains a sufficiently significant health worry that the EPA may be asked to relocate two communities, Picher and Cardin, and turn the 40-square-mile area into a wetlands.

But unless Congress gets around to reinstating the special taxes on petroleum and chemical companies that expired in 1995 or financing the program out of general revenues, the EPA may run out of money before the environmental and health issues raised within the boundaries of the Tar Creek project, long identified as the nation's worst toxic waste site, are resolved.

The time has come for Congress to get off dead-center. According to an Associated Press story the other day, the Superfund program has been depleted from a high of \$3.6 billion to a projected \$28 million by the end of next year. That latter figure not only wouldn't cover the relocation of the two Oklahoma towns, correction of the lead and zinc threats to the environment and creating a wetlands, but it probably would not cover much of the planning involved for these projects.

An analysis for the Environmental Protection Agency said that 33 Superfund sites in 18 states would receive no more money next fiscal year, a dozen sites would not get what is estimated as necessary for cleanup work and 50 additional sites simply would see budgets cut.

Congress should move with all haste to correct this unacceptable situation. The question is whether American taxpayers should pay for the cleanup or whether the costs should fall on those who create or contribute to these toxic messes. It is unfair to ask taxpayers to pick up the tab, although they inevitably do so indirectly when taxes on chemicals and petroleum are passed on to consumers.

What seems most appropriate is reimposition of the special taxes and greater oversight of what EPA is doing with the money. To say that \$50 million to \$100 million has been wasted over the years on Tar Creek work may be overly harsh. Second-guessing with hindsight is easy. But clearly the EPA didn't get the biggest bang for its bucks.