

Miami News Record

Chat dust still a concern

By Randy Petersen
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Two divided groups examining the fate of Picher and Cardin found common ground Tuesday.

While the heads of two Tar Creek area citizens' groups — John Sparkman of the Tar Creek Basin Steering Committee and Bill Lake of Speak Out — disagree on what should happen in the two northern Ottawa County towns, they said Tuesday that they agree on one thing — chat dust must be controlled.

Sparkman asked a group of state and federal agency representatives gathered Tuesday to revisit the possibility of imposing chat hauling regulations.

He said his concerns stem from the amount of dust created when mine waste is hauled from piles in and near Picher and Cardin.

"I think there is a misconception that we are going to be able to move this chat in two to three years," he said.

Lake agreed, noting piles smaller than those that exist today took about eight years to remove with steady hauling.

"If you belly up against one of those big chat piles, you are going to be there for awhile," Sparkman told a group of local, state and federal representatives gathered to discuss issues in the Tar Creek Superfund Site. "I don't care how many trucks you have coming."

Sparkman and Lake said they expect the dust to get worse as more and more chat owners make plans to haul the mine waste from the area. Both asked for state and federal help.

"We want to wind up making it a better place to live, but not making it miserable in the interim," he said.

Susan Waldron of the Ottawa County Department of Health said the dust becomes a safety concern for children growing up in the area.

She said efforts to lower numbers must include removing the risk of children breathing and consuming contaminated dust.

"Whether we're talking about buyout/relocation or moving the chat out, dust control is what we have to worry about," she said. "We might disagree on a lot of issues, but we all agree we have to handle the dust."

The issue was discussed three months ago, but Oklahoma Department Of Environmental Quality staff members said a proposed committee to discuss the issue won't be formed.

Mary Jane Calvey said the state agency is researching options.

"We have to know what we can and can't do," she said.

While focus groups may be formed, she said a local committee to create regulations won't be created.

She said the outcome of state study isn't expected to be new regulations.

"What we can come up with is guidelines and hopefully they will be accepted," she said.

She noted there are existing regulations that could govern air quality by the chat piles and hauling practices.

At the same time, the Environmental Protection Agency and Quapaw Tribe recently released a new fact sheet that outlines possible liability issues connected to mishandling chat and creating exposure risks.

Rafael Casanova, EPA remedial project manager, said the EPA guidelines have been sent to area chat haulers, local government officials and a variety of other groups.

"EPA can't tell anybody not to load it up and haul it off," he said, but noted the federal agency can make sure the practice doesn't cause significant harm.

Calvey said providing guidelines could help create a safer environment.

"Best management practices are something most companies have and that's where we are going to start," she said.

Lake suggested finding a way to remove chat from within city limits first, but Dennis Datin of ODEQ said there is no way for the state to regulate which chat is given a priority.

"You have to be careful that you don't restrict commerce," he said, noting chat haulers and sellers decide which piles are given a priority.