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## **Official says time is ripe for solution**

**By Gary Garton**  
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MIAMI, Okla. - Saying the door to federal funding is closing, Oklahoma's new secretary of the environment said Thursday that "now is the time to get any significant solution to the Tar Creek problem started."

"Given the likely cost of any solution you choose, the federal government is the only source that can afford the bill," said the official, Miles Tolbert. "Now we've got a new war to pay for, and tax cuts have been promised that will further dry up the pool of federal money.

"In another two or three years, the opportunity to fund a Tar Creek solution will be gone."

Tolbert was the keynote speaker at the opening session of the fifth annual National Conference on Tar Creek, sponsored by the group Local Environmental Action Demanded, or LEAD. The conference continues today at the Miami Civic Center. U.S. Rep. Brad Carson, D-Okla., is expected to address the conference at 3 p.m. today.

Tolbert said Oklahoma is "uniquely situated" to take advantage of political assignments in Washington, D.C., to find money for Tar Creek. Sen. Jim Inhofe is chairman of the committee that oversees environmental public works, and Sen. Don Nickles is on the Senate Finance Committee. Both are Republicans.

"There are really only two options in Tar Creek: Take the problem away from the people or take the people away from the problem," Tolbert said.

The Environmental Protection Agency is taking the former approach, with a soil-cleanup program that scrapes away yards and replaces them with clean dirt. Carson and many area residents are favoring a buyout program that would take the latter route.

Tolbert, a former assistant attorney general for environmental law, said there is a "national obligation to this area" to help solve the problem because its mines "were a significant factor in winning the two world wars for the United States."

Rebecca Jim, co-founder of LEAD, said that when she planned the first national conference on Tar Creek, "I had hoped it would help speed up a solution."

She titled this year's conference "We're Still Here."

"We will keep on until we find a solution, and I'll be honored to cancel next year's conference whenever that happens," she said.

Wren Stenger, division chief for the EPA's Region 6 Superfund program, told the conference that the agency hopes to go into the next phase of the cleanup this year.

"We have nearly completed Operating Unit Three now, which was the soil replacement in residential yards," she said. "There were 1,600 properties identified in 1996 to be remediated, and we are completing the last 460 now. The majority of that work will be done by the end of the year."

Stenger said the next phase will be the removal of chat piles and sediment from ponds at the old mine sites.

"We are negotiating with the potentially responsible parties (former area mining companies) over who will pay for the work," she said. "The Quapaw Tribe and Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality are preparing a consent order on the work to be done."

Stenger said the various agencies hope to have the negotiations completed by June, with work on chat removal to start soon after that.

She said the EPA, the state environmental-quality department and the Army Corps of Engineers also are working on a "memorandum of cooperation" to coordinate work on a "holistic approach" to solving the Tar Creek environmental problems