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Inhofe to introduce cleanup plan

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A plan to solve contamination problems at the Tar Creek Superfund site will be introduced in the U.S. Senate in the next three to six weeks, according to an aide to U.S. Sen. Jim Inhofe.

"We are working on putting together a plan and it should be out in the next few weeks," said Jared Young, deputy communications director for the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee chaired by Inhofe, R-Tulsa. "The legislation will be a big step towards cleaning it up. Certainly it will do more than what has been done in the past."

The plan is being developed by staff members working for the Environment and Public Works Committee. Numerous staff members have visited the Tar Creek site in the last six months to gather information for the project. The latest visit came about two weeks ago when Staff Director Andrew Wheeler and Counsel Ryan Jackson toured the site in the company of officials with the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality, Young said.

The Tar Creek site is located in what was once a northeastern Oklahoma mining district that was abandoned by mining companies in the late 1960s and early 1970s. The site contains hundreds of played-out and collapsed lead and zinc mines and is a source of polluted air and contaminated ground water that has seeped into private and municipal wells.

Placed on a national priority list for cleanup more than 20 years ago, almost \$100 million has been spent by state and federal agencies attempting to clean up the site, which contains the cities of Cardin, Commerce, North Miami, Picher and Quapaw. About 4,000 residents live within the boundaries of the site.

Young said the plan that Inhofe will begin introducing next month will include a series of legislative actions that would begin with bills to appropriate funds for cleanup of the 45-square-mile Superfund site.

Young declined to give specifics on the proposal, but said it would include a timetable for completing cleanup and other work.

"At this stage we're looking at all our options," Young said.

Any solution proposed by the senator would be comprehensive, according to Young.

"Since Sen. Inhofe is chairman of the Environment and Public Works committee he has oversight of many different agencies," Young said. "This means there will be a series of different bills and increments of different bills introduced to provide a multi-faceted approach to solving the problems at Tar Creek."

Local activists said they have heard that Inhofe was preparing to release a plan, but said they had been to learn what form the proposal would take.

U.S. Rep. Brad Carson, D-Claremore, recently announced at a Tar Creek conference organized by activists that he plans to propose a \$50 million plan that would offer a voluntary buyout to about 2,000 residents and approximately 60 business in Picher and Cardin.

Inhofe, though, has apparently not talked with local activists and will not detail his plan until he is ready to introduce legislation, Young said.

"We have tried to make a connection with Sen. Inhofe, but when we've tried to nurture a relationship with him or his staff we haven't been successful," said Ed Keheley, a rural Picher resident who has been active in advocating for a solution to problems at Tar Creek.

Another local activist said he had heard rumors about the plan, but had not been able to learn any details of the proposal.

"I've heard that it will remove all the chat piles," John Sparkman, chairman of the Tar Creek Basin Steering Committee said. "It's hard to know.

"We don't have much contact with Sen. Inhofe's office."