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Picher residents react with skepticism of plan

**By Gary Garton
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PICHER, Okla. - Tuesday's announcement that the Environmental Protection Agency has teamed up with two mining companies to pay for a study of the lead-contamination woes in the Tar Creek Superfund Site elicited a resounding reaction of skepticism and criticism locally.

Earl Hatley, an environmental law specialist with the University of Tulsa and longtime member of a local group called LEAD, for Local Environmental Action Demanded, said the proposed feasibility study is a step toward a possible resolution of one of the Tar Creek Superfund Site problems.

"Unfortunately, this agreement also illustrates a situation that is developing since Congress failed to renew funding for the EPA's Superfund program," Hatley said.

"Now the EPA is going to be held hostage by these PRPs (potentially responsible parties) at all of the remaining mega-sites remaining to be cleaned up. The only source of funds they're going to have left is whatever the PRPs agree to provide, and the large corporations are not going to agree to anything that will be detrimental to their interests in the long run."

Rebecca Jim, founder of the LEAD group, agreed with Hatley's summary, saying that a feasibility study would be limited to "ground zero" in the Superfund site, and would not address contaminants spread by the environment - water, wind and human activities - to other areas.

"There won't be any money to address the filtration of heavy metals and contaminants into Grand Lake from the former lead and zinc mining fields in Oklahoma, Kansas and Missouri," she said.

Ed Kaheley, a retired environmental engineer and former consultant with the federal government, has been active in the Tar Creek Steering Committee organized in the Picher area by John Sparkman.

Kaheley said the agreement between the Interior Department and the mining companies "agrees to duplicate the same studies and will produce the same information that is already available."

He said that while a feasibility study on chat is included in U.S. Sen. James Inhofe's Tar Creek plan, this study has been pending, awaiting an agreement with the PRPs for at least two years.

"Inhofe will probably try to take credit for this, but it's not his plan," he said.

Kaheley said that in his estimation, the study will find "the only logical solution is to put the chat back in the ground."

"They could pave a road 60,000 miles long with the amount of chat out there, and there is just not that large a commercial market for it," he said.

Sparkman, whose group has lobbied for a buyout of Picher and Cardin properties by the federal government, termed the announcement of another study "nothing we didn't already have."

"Instead of dragging this out another three years, they ought to be using information already available and get some kind of accelerated remediation plan in place," he said.

John Mott, a lifetime Picher resident who was a consultant for the EPA in the original Superfund effort to plug mine wells in the area in the 1980s, said he is fed up with studies.

"I grew up with lead, and went to work in the mines when I was 15, while I was finishing high school," he said. "Now I've got great-grandkids who are growing up here, with the same lead problems I faced.

"I'm sick and tired of some SOB telling me to wait for another study."