

Picher residents voice skepticism about plan

Federal, state agencies to address Tar Creek

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2/25/04

PICHER, Okla. — A new “comprehensive effort” by state and federal agencies to address local environmental problems drew responses of skepticism Tuesday night from Picher-area residents.

Representatives of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers’ Tulsa office staged a public meeting at Picher High School to discuss progress in its Tar Creek and Spring River Expanded Reconnaissance Study.

Originating in 2003 as a watershed-management study, the corps program, as funded by Congress, now includes all public-health and environmental issues relating to the Tar Creek Superfund Site. The site is the former lead- and zinc-mining fields of Ottawa County

The new plan involves the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of the Interior, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the U.S. Geological Survey and the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality.

It was completed as a “memorandum of understanding” by the agencies at meetings in January and earlier this month. The Quapaw Tribe of Oklahoma also participated in the meetings.

After a Jan. 22 meeting, EPA Regional Administrator Richard Greene said the cooperative effort was “essential in constructing a comprehensive plan for addressing the massive issues associated with the (Tar Creek) site.”

Tuesday night’s meeting was billed as a progress report on the corps’ efforts to complete the reconnaissance phase of the study.

Picher resident Gloria Garner voiced local frustrations, saying: “You’ve been coming up here for 20 years trying to solve the problem, and we haven’t gotten any answers. How is this going to be any different than that?”

Jonna Polk, project manager for the corps, responded: “No one agency has the capability and jurisdiction to address all the issues that have come up. There have been gaps in the programs, and a lack of communication to identify and address the shortages. That’s what we are hoping to do with this new comprehensive approach.”

John Sparkman of Picher, who advocates a buyout to move residents away from the area, asked whether the corps’ study to seek solutions to the problems excluded the possibility of a buyout.

Gene Lilly, with the corps' planning office, said the new program "looks at all the possible solutions."

"The buyout proposals are one, but we are looking at all of the alternatives," he said. "That was the direction we received when Congress funded the study."

Lilly said the reconnaissance phase of the study will be complete by August, and then a series of meetings will be held to formulate alternative plans to meet the different objectives identified in the first phase.

Mark Osborn of Miami asked what priorities would be given to the problems identified in the first phase.

John Roberts, deputy director of the corps' Tulsa office, said: "The first priority is the health and well-being of the children in the area, and other residents. That is the main concern behind all the remediation efforts now under way."

Bill Lake of Picher, who opposes buyouts, said he believes a special committee should be formed as a "go-between" for local residents and the federal agencies. "We need quality control to address the real concerns of the people here," he said. "Maybe a group of mayors and tribal leaders could provide that coordination."

Lilly said public hearings will be held throughout the study. "We are also going to try to combine all of the public meetings like this one, and the ones EPA and ODEQ hold, so that all agencies are present to hear local input," he said.

He said separate newsletters that are sent out by the various agencies will be combined into one.

"We really are trying to pull this together into one comprehensive effort rather than a lot of parallel programs going the same direction," he said.

Roberts said at one point in the meeting that in the past, too many different efforts by agencies to communicate with the public have led to confusion.

He cited a quote that he attributed to George Bernard Shaw: "The greatest problem in communication is the illusion it has been accomplished."