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Park safety study topic at conference

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An official with the Oklahoma Abandoned Mine Land Program said Thursday he would examine existing data and evidence in an effort to determine if further study is needed to decide if Picher's Reunion Park is threatened by a potential mine cave-in.

"I'd say the answer right now would be yes, that we're going to need to look at it some more," said Mike Sharp, the assistant director of the state abandoned mine program. "The (Army Corps of Engineers) took some samples there several years ago and, if they still have those, we'll look at them and see what they can tell us."

Sharp said he expects a decision to be made in the next 30 to 60 days about how to proceed with a study of subsurface mining below the park.

The Netta East Mine is between 170 feet and 200 feet below the surface. Ceiling heights in the complex range from 40 feet to 50 feet and excavation ranges from a few hundred feet to more than 1,000 feet in width.

Sharp, who has recently been working on a series of land reclamation projects in the Tar Creek Superfund site, where mining activity ceased in the early 1970s, was in Miami Thursday for a conference on activities at the lead and heavy-metal contaminated site.

The two-day conference continues today with discussions of health issues affecting residents living in the 43-square-mile site once given the highest national priority for cleanup.

Participants will also discuss safety and water issues during panel discussions scheduled today.

Sharp said he did not know if seismographic testing would be done as called for in a 1997 federal study of the land on which the park now sits. He will, however, consult with the U.S. Geological Service.

"I'm no mining engineer," he said. "I'll need the help of some experts to get this finished."

He said he would expect any additional testing would include drilling into the mine shaft.

"It wouldn't be just how deep the mine is, but the quality of rock and whether there are any cracks in it," he said.

He also said he will likely recommend a monitoring system that will consist of a cable or series of cables set in a concrete trench or trenches and stretched across the park.

"If there is movement of the ground there would be movement of the cable," he said. "That could give us a warning about what was going on beneath the ground and, within limits, set off an alarm."

A handful of area residents have expressed concerns about the park, which sits between First and Third streets and is bounded by Columbus Street on the west and Picher Street on the east.

Problems with a 1997 federal study done just before the land was donated to the Ottawa Reclamation Authority were brought to light in February by Don Ziehl, a mining engineer with the

federal Bureau of Land Management. Ziehl worked as a mine inspector in Oklahoma in the early to mid-1960s. Ziehl was also a member of a task force formed by former Oklahoma Gov. Frank Keating to examine a variety of issues, including the threat of subsidence or mine collapse, in the Superfund site.

"I've looked at a 1967 map done by Jack Frazier, the last mine inspector to go into the mine, and his map shows that some of the pillars have been removed," Sharp said. "The mine may also contain a concrete pillar that doesn't reach the top."

The area was fenced off by the Eagle-Picher mining company in 1951 and was reopened in 1997 first as a parking area for heavy equipment used by contractors with EPA and more recently as a city park.

Picher Mayor Sam Freeman and other city officials do not believe the park, the site of an annual miner's reunion attended by approximately 2,000 people each summer, is threatened by a potential mine collapse. They say because it supported heavy earth moving equipment used by contractors it is unlikely to subside.

Freeman has also contended that no pillars have been removed and that water filling the cavern provides sufficient support to assure the safety of visitors to the park.

Freeman, though, has asked for further study of the site on which the park sits, saying he expects any report resulting from the study would conclude the area is safe.