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EPA: Site in Black Eagle ideal for Superfund

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Contaminated soil found at the former metals refinery on Smelter Hill and at neighboring residential properties in Black Eagle is a good candidate for cleanup under the federal Superfund program, an Environmental Protection Agency official said Tuesday.

The EPA addresses the nation's most serious pollution sites in the Superfund program.

In addition to the refinery property and a sampling of Black Eagle yards, Missouri River sediments have elevated levels of heavy metals including arsenic and lead, according to the EPA.

Over the years, waste from the smelter was placed in a landfill on site or dumped in the Missouri River, the EPA found. Additionally, a 502-foot-tall stack at the facility allowed contaminants to be aerially dispersed over a wide area, agency officials said.

"The Superfund program was designed to deal with sites with issues as complex as this site," said Gwen Christiansen, site assessment manager for the EPA's Denver-based Region 8, which includes Montana.

The site is complex because it has multiple areas of contamination, Christiansen said.

Cascade County commissioners on Tuesday unanimously approved a resolution urging Gov. Brian Schweitzer to quickly nominate the former Atlantic Richfield Co. refinery and the community of Black Eagle for addition to the National Priorities List, better known as Superfund.

Christiansen said the listing is a good idea. Without a cleanup program, Black Eagle, Cascade County, the state and the EPA won't have a say in how the contamination is addressed, she said.

ARCO, which purchased the property in 1977, has said it prefers to proceed with a voluntary cleanup plan.

The National Priorities List includes locations with hazardous substances, pollutants or contaminants that the EPA considers a national priority for cleanup.

Besides concerns with the refinery property and river sediments, testing of residential soils in Black Eagle in 2007 and 2008 showed that 45 percent of the 70 properties sampled had elevated levels of lead and/or arsenic, Christiansen said.

As part of that testing, 10 properties on the south side of the river in Great Falls also were sampled. One sample out of 40 — four samples were collected at each home — had elevated levels of arsenic, while the rest were clean, Christiansen said.

Residents at properties that have tested at higher levels have been advised to limit contact with the soil and to make sure to wash their hands if they touch the soil, Christiansen said.

"We're not going to send out our emergency response team because we don't feel like the risk is immediate," she added.

Tuesday's county resolution urges Schweitzer to nominate Black Eagle to the EPA for the Superfund list because the state doesn't have the resources to pursue a cleanup.

Requests from governors are considered a key step in the process, and Schweitzer's office has said local input is important to his decision.

"It's pretty clear the governor wants a signal from the communities that this is what they want," Cascade County Commissioner Peggy Beltrone said.

The Black Eagle Civic Club Board of Directors plans to discuss the possible Superfund designation at a Sept. 2 meeting.

The soonest the EPA could propose the addition of Black Eagle to the Superfund list would be the spring of 2010, and a 60-day public comment period would follow such a proposal, Christiansen said. If the site is added to the list, an investigation would be the next step. That work would determine what areas need to be cleaned up.

Boston and Montana Consolidated Copper and Silver Mining Co. began construction of the first smelter at the Black Eagle site in 1892. Copper ore from Butte mines was concentrated, smelted and refined into blister copper at the location. Smelting activity occurred into the 1970s.

If the site is added to the Superfund's National Priorities List, the refinery area would become the state's 15th federal Superfund site.