

Alaska Asks EPA to Intervene in Mine Contamination

DAN JOLING, Associated Press

ANCHORAGE, Alaska (AP) — An abandoned mercury mine presents a threat to Alaska Native villagers that has not been adequately addressed by the federal Bureau of Land Management, according to Alaska Attorney General Michael Geraghty. He's asking the Environmental Protection Agency to intervene.

In a letter this month to EPA Administrator Lisa Jackson, Geraghty said Alaska since 1988 has tried working with federal land managers to properly investigate and clean up the Red Devil Mine 255 miles west of Anchorage. The mine is on the Kuskokwim River, the nation's ninth largest by discharge at its mouth in the Bering Sea.

"Despite Alaska's repeated requests, neither a thorough investigation of the nature and extent of the contamination nor an appropriate risk assessment to determine impacts on Alaska citizens have been completed," he wrote.

Residents of 24 Alaska Native villages downstream of the mine eat fish from the river, he said. Many are subsistence users and others catch them commercially or for recreation.

Geraghty asked Jackson to place the mine on the Superfund National Priorities List. The step would help ensure the federal government protects citizens by cleaning up soil, sediments and surface waters, he said.

BLM spokeswoman Ruth McCoard said at midday Friday no one was immediately available to answer questions about Red Devil mine cleanup.

According to the BLM website, the Red Devil Mine operated from 1933 until 1971 and sent out 35,000 2.5-quart flasks of mercury that each weighed 76 pounds. Operators mined above and below ground and disposed of tailings and processing wastes at the site.

Initial cleanup by the BLM in 1987 removed processing chemicals and PCBs in transformers. The agency said it also backfilled open mine shafts.

From 2003 through 2006, BLM focused "available funding" on cleanup fuel spilled from above-ground storage tanks. Economic stimulus money in 2009 again focused on petroleum cleanup.

The agency acknowledged that the lingering effect of metals mining, including leaching from tailings, has the potential for long-term environmental effects.

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"Flooded underground mine works allow groundwater to come in contact with remaining ore and host rock, which in turn can then enter surface water and/or impact drinking water quality," the agency said on its website. "The metals and their bio-available decomposition products can bio-accumulate in the foodweb, potentially affecting human health and the environment."

BLM and other agencies in 2008 began a study of potential risks. Samples collected from adult northern pike, sheefish, burbot, Dolly Varden and grayling in the Kuskokwim and tributaries showed elevated mercury concentrations. The study prompted state health officials to issue warning for consuming pike and burbot for women of childbearing age and young children.

According to the Alaska Department of Health and Social Services fact sheet, mercury at high levels can damage the brain and other organs. Young children and fetuses are more sensitive to mercury, which can be passed on from a mother's body.

Women of child-bearing age who eat fish in the Middle Kuskokwim River area can submit hair samples for free state analysis of their bodies' mercury levels.

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