Asarco Says Cleanup Won't Fix Silver Valley Pollution

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SPOKANE, Wash. (AP) — The largest financial contributor to the cleanup of Idaho's Silver Valley says the federal government's plan for the work is incomplete and will not end a century of dangerous heavy metals pollution in the mining district.

Asarco LLC, in a letter this week to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, contends that contaminated rail lines once operated by Union Pacific Railroad will continue to pollute the Coeur d'Alene River Basin.

As a result, Asarco fears the $635 million cleanup of the Silver Valley, located 60 miles east of Spokane, will be a waste of time and money.

"Clearly you have contamination left behind that is finding its way through the river and stream system into the environment and into the lake," said attorney Gregory Evans, who represents Asarco.

Asarco, which had large-scale mining operations in the area, reached a settlement with the EPA to provide $482 million to clean up the Silver Valley and has a major stake in ensuring the work is done properly, Evans said.

Union Pacific spokeswoman Donna Kush said the railroad's environmental work in the Silver Valley has been approved by the EPA.

"Asarco continues to make allegations that are completely false," Kush said. "Any new contamination is believed to be due to flooding redeposits from old mining activity."

Bill Adams, the EPA's manager for the cleanup, said the agency is confident that the old rail lines will not pollute the valley into the future.

Adams speculated that Asarco's letter to the EPA was prompted in part by the company's lawsuit against Union Pacific that seeks to get the railroad to pay some of its cleanup costs. Asarco has filed the lawsuit in federal court in Boise, Idaho. Union Pacific has moved to dismiss the lawsuit on the grounds that a previous settlement it reached with Asarco barred such claims.

The Coeur d'Alene River Basin is one of the nation's largest Superfund sites, with heavy metals poisoning land, streams, wildlife and humans. The wastes washed into waterways and moved downstream, some extending into the state of Washington.

Evans, in his letter to the EPA, said information from studies in 2005 and this year showed on-going contamination from abandoned UP railroad lines. Some of the

abandoned lines have been converted into a paved biking and walking path.

Along the South Fork of the Coeur d'Alene River, the rails-to-trails project is failing to contain pollution under the pavement, the letter contended.

Adams said the trail is safe for use by the public.

The railroad for more than a century hauled silver, lead and other heavy metals in the Silver Valley. The rail cars often had open tops and hinged bottoms, releasing poisonous heavy metals into the environment, the letter said.

The massive cleanup of a century's worth of mining pollution in Idaho's Silver Valley would take up to 30 years under a final plan approved by the federal government in late August.

The final plan is scaled back from a 2010 proposal which called for spending $1.3 billion over some 50 years.

Source URL (retrieved on *04/21/2015 - 3:45pm*):
http://www.chem.info/news/2012/09/asarco-says-cleanup-wont-fix-silver-valley-pollution