

The puzzle of the Parrot: What to do with mine tailings up to us

Standard
VIEW



There's good news and bad news, but there's no need to panic or celebrate ... yet.

First off, the groundwater running under the Parrot smelter tailings is moving from the Butte Civic Center to Kaw and George streets much faster than first thought.

This is the major conclusion of a \$500,000 ground water study recently completed by the Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology.

However, the majority of this contaminated mine water is being captured in the groundwater collection system underneath the Metro Storm drain ditch. It is not reaching Black-tail Creek which eventually dumps into Silver Bow Creek - Butte Superfund cleanup site.

"The water from the pump test looks like blue Gatorade," remarked Pat Cunneen of the state Natural Resources Damage Program. It is highly contaminated with zinc and copper among other minerals; more polluted than the Butte Hill or the Berkeley Pit water.

Cunneen's comments opened a public meeting last week of the Butte Natural Resource Damage Restoration Council (BNRC) which reviewed the recent water testing results. About 40 people attended the meeting.

Here's a little background to put it in perspective.

- o The Parrot smelter just started operating in 1881 along the banks of Silver Bow Creek, east of the present-day Civic Center. Tailings piles grow around it, and heaps of slag.
- o By 1899, the operation has closed, but the waste remains.
- o In the late 1950s, truckload after truckload of overburden from the Berkeley Pit is piled on the tailings and the slag. The Parrot ball field sits atop some of it; the county shops and the Civic Center also sit on top of the pile.

It was initially determined to leave the tailings in place undisturbed and just capture and treat the groundwater downstream.

Groundwater from there runs southwest along the Metro storm drain (and adjacent walking trail) to the Butte Chamber of Commerce building on George Street. The geology of the area forces it up and out around Montana Street where, if left unchecked, it could potentially flow into Silver Bow Creek.

The EPA and Arco started negotiating about what to do with the issue. BP-Arco settled it by offering \$28 million for cleanup however Butte-Silver Bow chooses to do it.

The Butte Natural Resource Damage Council, a citizen board, is charged with recommending what to do with the money. Elizabeth Erickson, chair of the board, says a decision may be reached by next spring. The issue is, if Butte spends \$20 million to clean up the tailings, it has little left for other more pressing needs, such as infrastructure repair.

Meanwhile, intensive testing has been taking place, and there's been lots of debate over the results. Now, however, some consensus is beginning to show.

Thanks to a report by Nicholas Tucci and Gary Icopini for the Bureau of Mines, the groundwater under the tailings is moving from at least twice as fast than first thought from initial tests in 2004. That sounds scary, but it is only one piece of the puzzle, says local EPA official Sara Sparks.

The EPA's take on the issue is that most of the contaminated water is being recovered and that to remove the tailings doesn't necessarily mean the water will turn clean. "You'll still have contamination from the Butte hill," said EPA's Julie DalSoglio. At present there is no threat to human health. Twenty or 40 years from now, no one knows.

And, if Butte wants to force BP-Arco to remove the tailings, all bets are off, according to Trey Harbert of Arco.

"We won't sign off on a consent decree, if that's the case," he told the group.

To some that sounded like a threat, but in Arco's eyes, it has negotiated a settlement that's final.

DalSoglio also pointed out that EPA checks remediated areas every five years. "If there's a failure, the consent decree can be reopened," she said.

There are other players at the table, too. The good news is that most are starting to agree on the data already collected.

The task of the council will be to sort through it all and come up with a workable solution all can sign off on.

As local citizen and longtime critic of the process Fritz Daily pointed out at the meeting, "Whatever you do it will be forever. It will affect our children and grandchildren. It's a serious decision."

We hope the pieces of the puzzle fall into the right place.