

Kivalina residents to meet with state, Cominco officials

by Soren Wuerth
for the Tundra Times

Residents of Kivalina, who are worried that their water and fish may be contaminated with dangerously high levels of zinc, will meet on Tuesday with state and Cominco Alaska Inc. officials to discuss their concerns.

Though representatives of Red Dog Mine are uncertain how the mineral is seeping into Red Dog Creek, which flows into the Wulik River, they know since the mine

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opened last summer the concentration from zinc in the stream has risen enough to turn the creek orange in color.

The nearly 300 residents of the remote village of Kivalina in Northwest Alaska pump water from the Wulik River into a holding tank when the river is clear.

Villagers have stopped drinking water from the tank, however, since they heard the river was contaminated, and they are only using it to wash their clothes, said Joseph Swan, Kivalina's mayor.

"The people won't drink the water unless it's pure," Swan said.

Red Dog Mine, operated by Cominco and owned by NANA Regional Corp., is located about 60 miles upstream from Kivalina. Cominco and NANA have invested about \$420 million into the mine, according to Cominco spokesperson Ron McLean.

Red Dog Creek flows through the mine, and its water is used to separate the mineral from the ore. However, waste water is returned to the river directly, McLean said.

Cominco has begun to reroute existing runoff gullies and has implemented pumps to divert the contaminated water to the tailing dam, said John Rense, vice president of NANA Regional Corp.

"There is no question that we have somehow increased the amount of zinc in the river, but we don't know how high the level is," Rense said. "The increase is too much to be explained by natural causes. However, we are committed to seeing the natural drainage restored."

So far, diverting ditches and rerouting drainages have worked to lower the zinc levels, Rense said.

But Swan said villagers want to meet face to face with Red Dog Mine operators and officials of the state's Department of Conservation and Department of Fish and Game to find out how harmful the mineral is to them and their main subsistence food — fish.

"We don't want any answers in a letter. We want answers in person," Swan said. "I was supposed to know how bad the zinc is, but I cannot read through all the numbers."

He said he is unsure if children who have symptoms of the flu may be sick from drinking water laced with zinc, which Rense estimates is at least four to five times the normal level. Some villagers have quit eating salmon

altogether, said Swan.

"The fish were behind schedule and they have stopped going upstream about three miles from the mouth of the river," Swan said. "The people know when they are not comfortable. My father-in-law was set netting and found an unusual fish, so he pulled out and never fished again. He's over 70 years old, and he knows what he's talking about."

The DEC and Fish and Game are still compiling data on how toxic the zinc is to fish, according to Pete McGee, regional supervisor for DEC.

"At the moment it's not time to panic here," McGee said. "If the fish look normal when you catch them and they are alive, they are probably all right."

Red Dog Creek has naturally high proportions of zinc, McGee said, but road construction and blasting have likely caused an increase in the amount seeping into the stream.

The DEC has asked Cominco and NANA to come up with an emergency plan for diverting channels away from ore deposits and for creating a better drainage system.

The agency also has requested they produce a short range proposal during the winter to construct new safety features for the mine, and Cominco must design a long-term plan to permanently control the levels of zinc entering the drainage.

The Red Dog Mine currently has an \$8 million local payroll, Rense said, and NANA hopes the mine will be prosperous to shareholders.

"Things happen," Rense said. "What's important is the way you react, and you react by fixing the problem. We're going to be there and Kivalina will be there long after the mine is done."