

Landowners unhappy with King Salmon cleanup plan

by Jeff Richardson
Tundra Times staff

The Bristol Bay Borough and Bristol Bay Native Corp. have issued strong objections to Air Force plans to cover over two drum disposal sites near the King Salmon airport. Both would prefer that the Air Force completely remove the drums and their hazardous contents, thought to be chiefly petroleum products, solvents, insecticides and herbicides.

Nearly one million barrels are believed to have been dumped at two distinct sites between the 1950s and 1970s.

The 30-day comment period on an environmental assessment and a Finding of No Significant Impact for the project produced a chorus of complaints from a wide variety of interests, and a promise by Sen. Ted Stevens to pressure the Air Force to consider other options. The environmental

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King Salmon cleanup plan slammed . . .

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assessment contends other options are too expensive.

The Air Force basically wants to cover the drums with 12 inches of soil, sand and gravel, then cover that layer with a synthetic 40-mil barrier. This so-called "geomembrane" would be covered with another 18 inches of clean native soil which would then be seeded with grass. Additional drainage structures would be included. The aim is to allow surface water to drain off and away from the drums to prevent water from leaching into the cached and possibly transporting contaminants into ground water below the drums. Apparently, military analysts, working with state officials and the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, do not feel there's any risk of the drums leaking directly into the underlying soils.

"We're upset," said Tom Hawkins, chief operating officer for Bristol Bay Native Corp. BBNC, along with Paug-Vik Inc., the village corporation for nearby Naknek, together own about half the dump area. But Hawkins said he's tried not to draw lines in the sand. "It is expensive, and they'll never have enough money to dig them all up. (But) we want some guarantees. We'd like to be released from liability. We have too many examples of dead wetlands."

Hawkins said a feasible ap-

proach would be for the government to build the best cap possible with available funds, then commit to repairing it any time it fails in the next 100 years.

"(Our position is) if you're going to leave this stuff, then at least benefit the community," said Hawkins, noting that BBNC owns an environmental services subsidiary which has not only provided technical review of Air Force plans, but also has the capability of helping implement the solution that is ultimately adopted.

Of great concern are several homes near the two dump sites and the prospect of the barrels leaking into anadromous fish streams. Homeowner Floyd Steele says a visit by government officials to the site in recent weeks may have produced a commitment to at least collect more data, but he is still concerned.

"Right now, I can't retire because I can't sell my home," Steele said, and suggested there may still be a class action lawsuit by property owners to force the government to conduct a more stringent cleanup. Steele also said the Bristol Bay Borough is worried about how dropping property values may affect the regional tax base.

"It's not just affecting one or two people out here," Steele said.

A resolution passed by the borough reads in part:

"WHEREAS, the USAF proposed remediation plan may pose health risks to the occupants of nearby residences and will likely result in a significant diminution of residential property values in the area; and

"WHEREAS, the USAF proposed remediation plan will not prevent hazardous waste from eventually entering anadromous streams and/or contaminating ground water;

"NOW THEREFORE BE IT RESOLVED by the Bristol Bay Borough Assembly that the U.S. Air Force is requested to reconsider its . . . Plan . . . and select an alternative that will result in all hazardous materials . . . being excavated and removed from the sites, or alternatively, that the USAF at least purchase all the homes and properties whose values will be significantly diminished."

Extensive comments by Bristol Bay Native Corp. take the Air Force to task for its Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI).

"We have provided significant comments in written and verbal form to the Air Force, almost none of which were considered for this FONSI," wrote Hawkins in a letter to the Corps of Engineers.

He said the environmental assessment is flawed in regard to numerous issues of local and regional concern: compensation to landowners (including BBNC),

wetlands protection, consideration of endangered species, the potential impact of local erosion on the dump sites, the prospects of leakage during the capping process, and plans to monitor the sites after capping. He said even in the absence of water quality degradation, failure to remove the drums could have serious impacts on the marketability of salmon taken from area streams.

Greenpeace Alaska has also sharply rebuked the Air Force for poor planning and evaluation of alternatives. In a May 18 letter to

the Corps of Engineers, spokesperson Jean Gamache cited a scientific critique of the Air Force analysis when she wrote:

"The Air Force has not fully determined the scope of contamination taking place in ground water, nor has it adequately assessed the threat of contamination to drinking water. . . The red salmon fishery in Bristol Bay is the world's largest wild stock red salmon fishery, yet the Air Force does not even address the potential pathways and impacts these contaminants pose to this fishery."