



Oklahoma
State
Senate

Legislative Brief

June 2004

TAR CREEK

Issue Background

Tar Creek is the now well-known reference to the nation's largest and highest-ranking Superfund Site designated by the federal Environmental Protection Agency, located in far Northeastern Oklahoma near the Oklahoma/Kansas border in Ottawa County. The site contains a forty-square-mile area within the State of Oklahoma, part of the Tri-State Mining District which includes portions of Kansas and Missouri. The Superfund Site affects a total population of roughly 30,000 residents from the Oklahoma communities of Picher, Cardin, Quapaw, North Miami and Commerce.

Throughout most of the last century the Tar Creek area was extensively mined for lead and zinc ore. The same industry that years ago brought great economic prosperity to the northeastern corner of our state has now left a legacy of human health problems and environmental calamity. The mining and milling of lead and zinc ore left approximately 300 miles of underground tunnels, 165 million tons of tailings or "chat", over 1,320 mine shafts and thousands of drill holes just in the Oklahoma portion of the Tri-State Mining District. Environmental threats to the natural resources in the area were first noticed in 1979 when heavy metal-laden water from the mine shafts began discharging into surface streams in the Tar Creek watershed.

Governmental agency attempts to halt polluted mine seepage have been largely unsuccessful but attempts to remediate dangers to human health due to elevated blood lead levels in area children have shown some success, even though the number of children with elevated blood lead levels remains well above the state and national averages. These remediation measures already conducted, at a cost of over \$100 million to date, include excavation and replacement of contaminated yards and recreation areas, lead-based paint removal and educational programs about the dangers of lead exposure.

Summary of Actions

Governor Brad Henry and his Secretary of Environment, Miles Tolbert, continue the state efforts to promote cleanup and remediation actions in the Tar Creek area. Governor Keating created a Tar Creek Superfund Task Force which issued an extensive report in 2000. More recently U.S. Senator Jim Inhofe, Governor Brad Henry, the

Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality, the Quapaw Tribe and the University of Oklahoma have jointly created a comprehensive plan to implement environmental remediation efforts and reduce health hazards for area residents.

Legislative Measures:

Senator Mike Morgan authored SB 1490, a voluntary relocation plan for families with young children in the Tar Creek area. This measure creates a local trust authority to oversee the process whereby a family which includes at least one child the age of six or under, living within the most affected portion of the area, may apply to have the trust authority purchase their home or provide rental assistance for one year and provide reimbursement for moving expenses. Homes or rental properties included in the relocation program may not be used to house young children until such time as the Commissioner of Health determines that the area is safe for young children to inhabit.

Funding Measures:

SB 2060 appropriated \$3 million to fund the activities of the trust authority created in SB 1490.

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