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Biochar touted as aid to cleanup at Formosa Mine near Riddle



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RIDDLE — The abandoned Formosa Mine near Riddle is surrounded by mine waste and toxic soils that are leaching metals into the waterways.

On Tuesday, a handful of Douglas County residents told the Environmental Protection Agency that spreading locally produced biochar, a charcoal made from wood waste, on the affected soils could help reduce the leaching and stabilize the soil.

EPA Remedial Project Manager Christopher Cora told about 25 people gathered for a hearing at Riddle City Hall that the EPA wants to collect much of the mine waste and store it in containment facilities that could be constructed in 2017.

In 2007, the mine was declared a Superfund site. The EPA estimates the cleanup will cost \$9.3 million.

When Canadian company Formosa Resources abandoned the site of its former mine in 1993, it left behind ground-up rocks laced with heavy metals like copper, zinc and cadmium. These are leached out of the mine waste and carried by rain water and snow melt until they reach Middle and South Fork creeks.

Contaminated water also pours from an opening in the mine when rainwater raises the level of the waterlogged waste inside. The EPA is delaying action on that problem until the Bureau of Land Management completes its own attempt to plug the leak.

Cora said the mine isn't creating a human hazard but the EPA hopes to restore the creeks enough to bring back the trout and salmon which were abundant in the 1980s, before Formosa Resources reopened the mine.

"It doesn't take a rocket scientist to go out there and see that there's no fish where there should be fish," he said.

Cora said hauling out and containing mine waste could significantly improve water quality, especially in the South Fork.

Local resident Lenny Schussel, a chemist who hiked around the mine site before Formosa Resources was mining there, said he remembered the creeks when they were full of fish.

He urged the EPA to hire local people for the cleanup effort and to encourage a local cottage industry of biochar production.

“Let’s get this engine running and let’s get back to the 1970s where this area was the top per capita income in the nation, not the bottom,” Schussel said.

Schussel also complimented Cora on the cleanup plan.

“This is one of the finest proposals I’ve ever seen formulated by our federal government,” he said.

Michael Maffei of Riddle likened the EPA’s containment plan to putting a genie back in a bottle and putting a cork in it. After that’s done, he said, biochar could be used to spur fast growth of trees and stabilize the soil.

M.A. Hansen, president of the nonprofit Umpqua Bio-Alternatives cooperative, said biochar would be “the cat’s meow for what you have happening there.”

She said biochar would help prevent minerals leaching into the water.

“I just really think it has a place in this project,” she said.

Some audience members asked who owns the mine site and who could be held responsible for the cleanup. Cora said no one owns the land and Formosa has gone bankrupt, leaving the government with no one to charge for the cleanup.

Though there is some concern that the pollution could eventually flow from Middle Creek into Cow Creek, which supplies Riddle with water, Cora said Riddle’s drinking water is safe.

Riddle Mayor Bill Duckett and City Manager Kathy Wilson said before the meeting that Riddle’s water is tested daily and has not been contaminated.

“We try to monitor it very closely. I’ve got an excellent crew here,” Duckett said. “They do a fantastic job monitoring it and making sure water quality is as pure as we can get it.”

If traces of metals show up, Duckett said filters would probably have to be modified. Wilson said Riddle provides water to 550 households and businesses and to the South Umpqua Water Association, which uses Riddle’s treated water to serve an additional 299 customers.

Duckett said “no one’s real happy” with the Formosa Mine situation but he feels the EPA is handling the problem well.

“I think they’re doing a good job. We just have to give them time,” he said. “It’s not something that’s just a real quick fix that you’re going to do overnight.”

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