Columbia Falls Aluminum Reduction Plant

Columbia Falls, Montana

U.S. ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY • REGION 8 • JUNE 2015

National Priorities List Status

On March 26, 2015, EPA proposed adding the Anaconda Aluminum Company's Columbia Falls Reduction Plant (also known as the Columbia Falls Aluminum Company Plant) to the National Priorities List (NPL).

The NPL is the list of national priorities among the known releases or threatened releases of hazardous substances, pollutants, or contaminants throughout the United States.

Adding the site to the NPL allows the EPA and the community to access significant technical and financial resources to address the environmental and health risks posed by the site.

The proposed listing was subject to a 60-day public review and comment period, which ended on June 2, 2015. All comments will be considered by the agency. The decision to add the site to the NPL will be made after the EPA has reviewed and responded to all comments.

EPA is utilizing federal Superfund authorities and tools to investigate contamination at the Columbia Falls Aluminum Reduction Plant. The next steps in the Superfund process at the site are the Remedial Investigation and Feasibility Study (RI/FS). The objectives of the RI/FS are to assess site conditions, determine the nature and extent of contamination, and evaluate alternatives to the extent necessary to select a remedy. The RI/FS will expand on the screening level investigation already completed at the site.

Generally, EPA first looks to the Potentially Responsible Parties (PRPs) to perform the RI/FS under a legally binding agreement with EPA oversight. If the PRPs are not willing to complete the work under a legally binding agreement, EPA may then consider other options under the federal Superfund law. These could include completing an EPA-led Remedial Investigation and recovering the costs from the PRPs.

EPA notified the PRPs of their potential Superfund liability on June 9, 2015. The agency has invited the PRPs to enter into a legally binding agreement to perform a full RI/FS under EPA oversight.

EPA is committed to encouraging community and local government involvement throughout the Superfund process. The agency will be working cooperatively with the local community and other stakeholders to ensure that the cleanup protects human health while considering redevelopment goals. EPA also is committed to maintaining the close working relationship that has already been established with Montana Department of Environmental Quality.

As the RI/FS is conducted, EPA will work with the PRPs and the State to ensure that contaminants in the groundwater are identified to ensure that the long-term cleanup will be protective of human health. The PRP has committed to sample domestic wells to identify potential risks to nearby residents.

Columbia Falls Site Reassessment

A Site Reassessment (SI) was completed for the Columbia Falls Aluminum Reduction Plant site in April 2014. EPA collected environmental samples in September and October 2013 as part of the Site Reassessment. This was a screening assessment to determine if contaminants were present at the site and if contaminants had migrated to nearby receptors.

What contaminants have been found at the site?

The results of the SI indicate there are multiple contaminants present above background conditions associated with the three investigated source areas: the North and South Percolation Ponds and the Landfill area. Various metals, cyanide and fluoride were detected in groundwater down gradient from the source areas. These contaminants were found at levels above Safe Drinking Water Act allowable limits (known as the Maximum Contaminant Level or MCL). MCls are the regulatory standards for municipal water supply systems. Contaminated groundwater at the site has the potential to migrate to areas currently used as private drinking water sources and to the Flathead River and Cedar Creek.

Is drinking water in the area safe?

EPA has sampled residential wells near the site on three occasions. During the first round of sampling in September 2013, cyanide was detected in two wells. Concentrations of cyanide in both wells were below MCLs. In response to the detection of cyanide, EPA has since conducted two subsequent rounds of domestic well sampling in/near the site. In April 2014 and November 2014, EPA sampled 20 and 10 domestic wells, respectively. In both 2014 sampling events, cyanide was not detected in domestic wells, nor was any contaminant detected above regulatory or risk based benchmarks.

At this time, EPA is not aware of any contaminant concentrations in residential wells above EPA's MCLs. Access to safe drinking water for nearby residents is a priority for EPA.

Is the Columbia Falls water supply impacted?

EPA does not have any data that indicate Columbia Falls' municipal water supply is impacted. Columbia Falls' water supply is a groundwater source more than three miles from the sampled source areas. The municipal wells are sampled regularly as part of the federal Safe Drinking Water Act requirements for municipal water supplies.

Have any contaminants migrated from the site to the Flathead River?

Yes. Sediment samples collected from the Flathead River and surface water samples collected from Cedar Creek have document the two water bodies have received contaminants from the site, including metals, and cyanide. This stretch of the Flathead River is believed to be used by anglers. During the screening level investigation, fish tissue samples were not collected. Therefore, it is unknown if fish populations have been impacted.

Does EPA know the full extent of contamination?

No. A screening level assessment has been completed. It was designed to determine whether or not hazardous contaminants are present at the site and if the contaminants are migrating away from the site. It was not designed to determine the extent of contamination. The nature and extent of contamination at the site as well as cleanup alternatives will be determined during the RI/FS.

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