A letter to Zinke about CFAC

By BILL DAKIN | Posted: Monday, March 23, 2015 8:12 am

The following letter was sent to Rep. Ryan Zinke by Columbia Falls resident Bill Dakin in response to Zinke's letter to Gov. Steve Bullock opposing putting the Columbia Falls Aluminum Co. site on the federal Superfund's National Priorities List.

As a lifelong Columbia Falls resident and businessman, I am appalled at your letter opposing the listing of the Columbia Falls Aluminum Co. smelter site on the EPA Superfund National Priority List.

You have no wisdom to impart to the people of this community in this. Your advice is off-mark. I cannot recall your attendance at any of the numerous Columbia Falls public meetings during your two-year campaign, which might account for your mistaken presumption.

The people of this community have spoken with clarity — in person at meetings, by written comment, and through our elected city leaders. We have spoken almost unanimously that we want the site investigated and, if necessary, remediated, and that we are wearily fed up with the obfuscation and deliberate, deceptive stalling of CFAC, its hired spokespeople and its multi-national conglomerate owner.

Many of us, people who toiled there for three generations, know very well what is buried, settling and stored there. You have no idea. Your letter belittles our knowledge and insults our city officials who have far more grasp of the issues and far more at stake than you do. They have, with admirable integrity and vision, opted for discovery, treatment and to move forward to a bright and prosperous future, instead of abiding the inertia of the status quo.

The "plant," as we call it, is inextricably a part of our heritage. With great pride for 50 years it made aluminum vital to America. It brought prosperity and gave greatly to the community. Thousands of kids like me grew up here and called it home because the plant existed.

The companies that owned it then were not Glencore. The world changed. When a rancher's favorite brood cow dies, he has nostalgia and remorse for her lost youth, her loyal life and appreciation for all the calves she birthed. But her body isn't left in the pasture to putrefy and sicken the rest of the herd.

I'm disappointed and appalled that you advocate for CFAC/Glencore and those who want to sweep the issue aside, minimize any "harmful image" and spend years and more years stalling, misleading and doing nothing while toxins potentially leach and percolate through the ground and

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into the adjacent Flathead River drainage. We have six years of empirical proof that, absent regulatory pressure, Glencore/CFAC will do exactly, explicitly, profoundly nothing.

The fact that these Montana Superfund sites take decades to mitigate is not the fault of the underfunded EPA. It is the fault of history and other times — of the polluters, careless huge companies and the unending greed of their stockholders, from a time passed when the consequence of pollution wasn't understood even to well-meaning managers, to the modern era when we know better than to pretend it is not important.

And it is the fault of today's apologists, trusted to represent the people, but who instead rise so willingly to undermine and back stab the governmental agencies that were created at more thoughtful times by more visionary leaders to serve the public good.

From the era of the copper kings to W.R. Grace & Co., extractive industries in Montana have left in the wakes of private fortunes the maimed lives of people and a bouquet of toxic wreckage to our precious landscapes. In 2015, Montanans have seen the light. I can only surmise that the people of the Clark Fork Valley, Somers and Libby are very relieved that you were not elected to office a decade or two sooner. Pretty lucky for them.

How ironic to be elected to federal office partly by running against the "over-reaching federal government" that oppresses us from on high and then, as soon as one attains a federal pulpit from which to preach, the officer-holder postures to see more clearly from Washington, D.C. what we should think and do and what is best for us. Who, I wonder, has been talking with whom?

We have no reason, no reason whatsoever, to have confidence that Roux Associates, in the employ of CFAC/Glencore, will objectively "investigate" the site. Dollars get as dollars want. It's just more of what we have come to realize are unending shell games and superficial pretenses of concern.

For years, they have been dishonorable with their employees, with this community, with Sen. Jon Tester and the Bonneville Power Administration, and with the Montana Department of Environmental Quality. Only the government, which is supposed to serve we, the people, can be trusted to test and verify without bias.

That is, if our institutions can endure the pressure of congressional bashing such as yours to the benefit of the companies with so much to gain, to conceal and to stall about.

Remember please (I hope this is not news to you), when CFAC/Glencore "bailed" on accepting a remediation plan with the Montana DEQ (unlike what the BNSF Railway did for Whitefish), they knew full well the next step would likely be the federal NPL. Their own choice put us on this course to federal Superfund listing.

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Your advocacy for CFAC/Glencore and your bashing of the EPA Superfund process is deplorable. You owe the people and the elected officials of the city of Columbia Falls an apology.

Bill Dakin lives in Columbia Falls.

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