EDITORIAL: CFAC cleanup moves in right direction

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A deal reached this week between the federal government and the owner of Columbia Falls Aluminum Co. will begin the process of determining how to move forward with assessing and then cleaning up contamination at the 960-acre plant site in Columbia Falls.

This is a good first step in addressing the pollution remaining from decades of aluminum production. And more than likely, there is considerable remaining pollution. Soil sampling has detected potentially hazardous levels of contaminants including cyanide, fluoride, arsenic, chromium, lead and selenium in surface water, groundwater and soils at and adjacent to the aluminum plant's campus.

We appreciate Glencore, the international commodities giant that owns the plant, agreeing to spend $4 million for this preliminary process.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has been pushing for a Superfund designation at the massive plant site, though many community leaders understandably are concerned with the stigma that often comes with the designation.

It may still be possible to avoid a Superfund listing, but that will depend on Glencore's willingness to go the distance in making sure the site gets a clean bill of environmental health. The company would have to assure the EPA it will foot the bill for cleanup, and no one knows yet how much that will cost.

We do know that large corporations don't always pay for the full extent of damage they've caused to the environment. In the wake of asbestos contamination from the W.R. Grace & Co. vermiculite mine in Libby, the federal government has spent more than $540 million to date removing toxic asbestos in that community.

To be fair, in 2008 a bankruptcy judge approved an agreement for Grace to reimburse the federal government $250 million of the Libby cleanup costs. Of course the Libby asbestos contamination isn't an apples-to-apples comparison with the CFAC site, but it does illustrate how communities are pushed into Superfund scenarios when there's no other option but to have the federal government step in and clean up contaminated sites.

And don't expect the CFAC site to be cleaned up any time soon. The feasibility study likely won't be completed until 2020, and after that comes a full-blown environment assessment, public comment period and who knows how much negotiating between Glencore and the EPA. It could be another decade before the site is cleaned. As a reminder, Libby is in its 15th year of asbestos cleanup.

Say what you want about government intervention, but there is a time and a place for federal oversight, even if it ultimately means a Superfund designation for Columbia Falls. We endorse any

method of getting the plant site cleaned up.