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Final agreement to study contamination at Columbia Falls aluminum plant site (Flathead County, Mont.)

Plant owner commits to aggressive site investigation to inform future cleanup actions

Contact: Joe Vranka, 406-457-5039; vranka.joe@epa.gov; Richard Mylott, 303-312-6654; mylott.richard@epa.gov

(Denver, Colo. - November __, 2015) The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has announced a final agreement to investigate contamination at the Columbia Falls Aluminum Plant, also known as the Anaconda Company Columbia Falls Reduction Plant site, in Flathead County, Montana. Under the terms of the agreement, the site's current owner, Columbia Falls Aluminum Company, will conduct a comprehensive investigation of soils, river sediments, and ground and surface water to determine the nature and extent of contamination at the site. The company will reimburse EPA for its future costs in overseeing the investigation.

"This agreement will help us fully identify the nature and extent of contamination and begin to address threats to human health and the environment at the Columbia Falls Aluminum Plant Superfund site," said Shaun McGrath, EPA's regional administrator in Denver. "We are encouraged that the company has committed to an aggressive investigation of the contamination in a legally binding agreement."

The site, located two miles northeast of Columbia Falls, covers approximately 960 acres north of the Flathead River, a fishery that includes the federally designated threatened bull trout and the federally sensitive westslope cutthroat trout. EPA's initial evaluation indicates that ground water and surface water at the site contain various contaminants of concern, including cyanide, fluoride, and various metals.

The results of the investigation will determine cleanup needs and identify potential cleanup options at the site. EPA representatives will attend a community meeting in Columbia Falls on January 21, 2016, from 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. at the Columbia Falls High School cafeteria to discuss the agreement, address questions, and outline next steps, including opportunities for public involvement.

EPA worked closely with the Montana Department of Environmental Quality to negotiate the scope and details of the investigation.

The Columbia Falls Aluminum plant operated between 1955 and 2009 and created significant quantities of spent potliner material, a federally listed hazardous waste, as a byproduct of the aluminum smelting process. Spent potliner material is known to contain cyanide compounds that can leach into groundwater.

In 1985, Columbia Falls Aluminum Company bought the plant from Atlantic Richfield Company, which had purchased the facility from the plant's original owner, Anaconda Company, in 1977.

Surrounded by more than two million acres of the Flathead National Forest and with the Flathead River flowing through town, Columbia Falls is known as the gateway to Glacier National Park. The community offers access to Glacier National Park's Camas Creek and West Glacier entrances, as well as the beautiful North Fork of the Flathead River.