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Ecology Department, Burlington Northern to sign cleanup agreement

SPOKANE - With the public's approval, the state Department of Ecology (Ecology) and Burlington Northern Santa Fe Railway (BNSF) will enter into a consent decree to clean up the Aluminum Recycling Corporation site in the Hillyard area of Spokane.

A public hearing will be held on the consent decree on March 5 at 7 p.m. at the Northeast Community Center, 4001 N. Cook St., Spokane. Written comments will be accepted until March 9.

The site, at 3412 Wellesley Ave., is polluted with about 65,000 cubic yards of waste in several piles and an abandoned pit. The waste consists of "dross" that used to be reprocessed at the site on land leased from Burlington Northern Railroad Co. (BNSF)

Dross is a skim that forms on the surface of molten metal. The dross contaminating the Wellesley Ave. site came from aluminum smelters owned by aluminum manufacturers such as Kaiser Aluminum and Chemical Corp. (Kaiser).

To make ingots of recycled aluminum to sell, the operators added sodium and potassium chloride salts to the dross and extracted molten aluminum metal. Most of the waste at the site is "black dross," which is dross with the added chloride.

The first operator of the aluminum-dross reprocessing facility was Hillyard Processing Co., beginning in 1954. The operator changed several times over the years, with Aluminum Recycling Corp. being the last company to run the facility.

After the site was abandoned in 1987, an Ecology inspection found that the underground water was contaminated with chloride, fluoride, nitrate and nitrite, all coming from the dross. The soil also contained elevated levels of lead.

The site was then prioritized for cleanup according to Washington's Model Toxics Control Act.

The companies identified as responsible for the cleanup are Burlington Northern, Kaiser and Alumax Inc. Alumax is owned and operated by Alcoa Inc.; Kaiser and Alumax opted not to sign the consent decree.

The responsible parties and Ecology have decided that containing the contaminants on the property in a manner that protects the public from exposure to them is the best course of action. The plan includes re-grading the piles of waste and covering them to prevent the contaminants from filtering down to the underground water, quarterly monitoring of the underground water to ensure improvements are being made, fencing the area, and periodically reviewing the progress at the site.

The draft consent decree is available for review at the Hillyard Branch of the Spokane Public Library, 4005 N. Cook St., and at the Department of Ecology's office, 4601 N. Monroe St., in Spokane. Call 509-456-2751 to review the documents.

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