

Summary of Questions & Answers

The Washington Department of Ecology held a comment period for the Van Stone Mine [draft Feasibility Study](#) May 22 through June 22, 2017. We hosted a public meeting on June 14, 2017, to explain the cleanup options presented in the study.

This document summarizes the questions asked by the 18 attendees and Ecology's responses. It is not a verbatim transcript of the meeting. You can [download the presentation](#) from Ecology's website.

Question: Were contaminants found in Lotze Creek or tributaries of Onion Creek?

Answer: Water samples were generally clean and met Washington's standards for surface water quality. We did find contaminants in the sediments of some creek bottoms.

Q: Do the cleanup options cover the pit areas where water has collected and formed lakes?

A: The standing water won't be drained because the water is not contaminated. Ecology's Dam Safety Office is concerned about the earthen dam at North Pit Lake, so all the cleanup options under consideration include installing a buttress to reinforce it.

Q: Is there a specific depth to which the tailings piles will be excavated?

A: We did a number of borings and used light detection and ranging (LiDAR, a remote sensing method that uses a pulsed laser to measure distances) to find the bottoms of the tailings piles. The depths vary, but we won't stop excavating until remaining soil meets cleanup standards.

Q: Do you have ASARCO and Equinox Resources' engineering documents?

A: We believe we have Equinox's, but we'll check with the Washington Department of Natural Resources (DNR), which keeps mining-related records, about ASARCO's. We did receive a lot of historical records from DNR during the investigation.

Q: When you start disturbing the site during cleanup, will contaminants be getting into our drinking water?

A: We will ensure erosion from disturbed ground is not getting into surface waters by preventing and controlling erosion, particularly where there is a risk of runoff. Since contamination has not impacted groundwater, we wouldn't expect this to change during cleanup activities. We will continue to sample our groundwater monitoring wells.

Q: Is contamination affecting residential wells?

A: During the investigation, we contacted all the nearby well owners and sampled the water of those who gave permission. At the public meeting held in August 2011, we

Van Stone Mine Feasibility Study
Public Meeting at Onion Creek Middle School
June 14, 2017, 7–8 p.m.



offered to test the water of anyone who requested it. We also installed a series of monitoring wells and didn't find contamination in groundwater samples taken in October 2015 and February 2016.

Q: What about airborne contamination during cleanup work?

A: We will be controlling the dust by spraying everything down with water. We will also continue monitoring air quality in the area to ensure it's safe.

Q: What depths are the groundwater monitoring wells?

A: Depth to groundwater varies depending on the location, but generally from 10 – 75 feet.

Q: If you start cleanup construction in fall 2018, won't you be disturbing the contamination and then leaving it over the winter?

A: We will plan the work so nothing that may cause the spread of contamination would be left unfinished over the winter.

Q: What is the tonnage of the upper tailings pile?

A: 780,000 tons

Q: Why are you working on this now after it's already been this way for years?

In the early 2000s, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency investigated unmanaged mine and mill waste sites all over the upper Columbia River region, judging the risk of mass failures of tailing piles and water quality concerns to be significant.

ASARCO, one of the previous mine owners, filed bankruptcy in 2005, and Ecology received \$3.5 million that we have used to investigate the site and complete emergency cleanup actions. Some of this settlement remains to fund cleanup.

Ecology sent Equinox, another previous mine owner, an early notice letter in 2006, giving them the option to voluntarily clean up the mining contamination before we made it a formal cleanup site under state management. Equinox made some efforts to address the issues, but they didn't resolve all the problems. No legitimate owner or operator currently exists to lead the cleanup efforts.

Due to the size and complexity of the site, Ecology began the formal cleanup process under the Model Toxics Control Act in 2007. We ranked the site hazard as 1 on a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 presenting the highest risk, and began fully investigating the contamination and cleanup needs to protect human health and the environment.

Q: What is the impact to surface waters and downstream residents? Is it safe for kids to play in creeks?

A: During the investigation, we didn't see impacts to surface water from site activities. Water coming from the pit lakes is alkaline, which causes metal contaminants to drop out to sediments on the bottom. Generally, kids playing in creeks is safe, but you might want to avoid water activities when sediments are stirred up into the water column during spring runoff or other high water events.

Q: What portion of the site does Stevens County own? How did they come to own it?

A: Stevens County owns portions of the waste rock piles, north and south pits, a tailings pipeline, and the lower tailings pile.

Equinox, the mining company out of Panama that last operated the mine, eventually stopped paying property taxes after closing the mine in 1993. Stevens County became the owner of their former property by default.

Q: Who owns the tailings pipelines, associated road, and easement?

A: A mix of private landowners and Stevens County.

Q: Will you cover the loads on trucks transporting tailings?

A: Probably not, but all loads will be watered down to keep dust from blowing. Wear and tear on roads will be repaired as well.

Q: Who makes the final decision on which cleanup option is chosen? Who signs the final cleanup action plan?

A: With public input, cost, and benefits factored heavily into our decision, Ecology makes the final choice. The cleanup site manager, Brendan Dowling, writes and signs the final cleanup action plan.

Q: Where does the funding come from?

A: Under Washington's cleanup law, the Model Toxics Control Act, liability for cleanup costs is joint and several, meaning that any company or individual who has owned or currently owns property being cleaned up, operated on the property, or contributed to the contamination at the site is liable for cleanup costs. Basically, the polluters pay rather than the taxpayers.

The state doesn't get involved in assigning the amount of liability to each party. They work that out privately.

While unwillingness to pay sometimes leads to time-consuming legal proceedings, our goal is to negotiate successfully and as quickly as possible to come to a cleanup agreement with liable persons.