

Devil of a job

Mercury mine to be cleaned

The Associated Press

BETHEL — The Red Devil Mine, once one of the nation's major producers of mercury, will be cleaned up next year, officials with the Bureau of Land Management said.

More than 2.7 million pounds of liquid mercury were extracted from ores at the mine between its founding in 1933 and its closure in 1971.

Since then, remediation efforts have been sporadic at the site, located just outside the village of Red Devil on the upper Kuskokwim River, about 100 miles southwest of McGrath.

In an effort to resolve lingering questions about Red Devil's safety, an Anchorage firm hired by the Bureau of Land Management will conduct a study of environmental hazards at the mine this summer. The company, Harding, Lawson & Associates, would clean up the site next summer.

Red Devil's potential dangers are both natural and man-made, Mike Alcorn, an environmental protection specialist with the BLM, told

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the Tundra Drums.

Industrial wastes left over from the mine's heyday litter the area, Alcorn said. Several drums of waste oil, dozens of lead-acid batteries and sheets of asbestos also will have to be removed.

Of concern as well, Alcorn said, are the piles of mine tailings, which consist of ores containing antimony, arsenic and mercury. Also, a recent investigation of the site turned up "about a teaspoon" of pure, liquid mer-

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cury, he said.

In its pure form, mercury is toxic when ingested. In humans, it harms the central nervous system, causing blurred vision or blindness, tooth loss, equilibrium disruption and damage to developing fetuses.

It also accumulates in the

fatty tissues of fish and animals, posing harm both to those species and to the people who consume them.

Red Devil's proximity to both people and water makes it a worrisome site for the BLM, Alcorn said.

The mine area is drained by Red Devil Creek, which flows into the Kuskokwim River a quarter-mile away.

Warnings posted to ward off trespassers don't do much good, Alcorn said.

"People shouldn't be walking up there, but we know they do," he said.