

# BLM orders cleanup of Red Devil mercury mine

By Aaron Sptzer  
The Tundra Drums

The Red Devil Mine, once one of the nation's major producers of toxic mercury, will soon be undergoing an environmental cleanup, according to federal officials.

Over 2.7 million pounds of liquid mercury were extracted from ores at the mine between its founding in 1933 and its closure in 1971 — a time when ecological regulations were all but non-existent.

## Cleanup ...

From Page 1

up "about a teaspoon" of pure, liquid mercury.

In its pure form, mercury is toxic when ingested by living organisms. 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 a quarter mile into the Kuskokwim River.

By land, the site is accessible to the village via a mile-long overgrown track. Warnings, posted to ward off trespassers, likely do little good, Alcorn admitted. "People shouldn't be walking up there, but we know that they do."

The Red Devil Mine has received renewed attention in the wake of the controversy over the cleanup of another regional mercury mine, Red Top, near the village of Aleknagik in Bristol Bay.

Though Red Top produced less than one-thousandth the amount of mercury as Red Devil, the 1992 discovery there of liquid mercury on a river floodplain prompted action by the environmental group Greenpeace and mobilized a state and federal cleanup effort which continues to this day.

Since then, remediation efforts have been sporadic at the site, situated just outside the village of Red Devil on the upper Kuskokwim River. Assessments of the area's current cleanliness vary based on who one talks to.

In an effort to resolve lingering questions about Red Devil's safety, an Anchorage firm hired by the Bureau of Land Management will be conducting a study of environmental hazards at the mine site this summer. Next season the company, Harding, Lawson & Associates, will undertake a cleanup of the area.

in Dillingham's Bristol Bay Times, a former BLM official who worked at both Red Top and Red Devil questioned why the latter, much larger site hasn't received more attention.

The article quotes Anchorage resident Mac Wheeler, who was once the BLM site manager at both mines. "I think eventually someone's going to wake up (and realize) that BLM has wasted money on Red Top that could have been better spent at Red Devil," he said.

"We knew environmentally it was one of the worst sites we had. It never made sense to me. They (mercury levels) were off the scale."

Indeed, when Environmental Protection Agency officials studied

the site in the early 1970s they found the mine's settling ponds to contain mercury levels of more than 12,000 parts per billion. The federal limit for drinking water is 2 parts per billion.

But according to Elizabeth Bailey, a U.S. Geological Survey geochemist who has also conducted studies of both mine sites, mercury in its toxic form is now rare at Red Devil.

"I know the levels that I have found are very low compared to total mercury (ore)," she said. "We're talking by orders of magnitude."

Bailey said that fish populations at the mouth of Red Devil Creek were sampled in both 1993 and

1996 and found to be mercury-free. Alcorn concurred with Bailey's analysis.

Red Top had a few higher hits when tested for mercury concentrations, he said. "It appears that there are even lower levels of contamination at Red Devil."

Industrial wastes, left over from the mine's heyday, litter the area, he said. Several drums of waste oil, dozens of lead-acid batteries and sheets of asbestos will also 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, he said, a recent investigation of the site turned

See Cleanup, Page 8

1996 and found to be mercury-free.

Alcorn concurred with Bailey's analysis.

Red Top had a few higher hits

when tested for mercury concentrations, he said. "It appears that there are even lower levels of contamination at Red Devil."

*fax to Mike Alcorn 267-1304*

*Thanks for your help on this, Mike!*