

# State to issue White Pine cleanup order

By **SHERRY DEVLIN**  
of the *Missoulian*

Promising that "nothing will fall through the cracks," the directors of the state agriculture and health departments agreed

Monday to a tough, 12-point list of "community expectations" for the cleanup of chemical pollution at Missoula's White Pine Sash Co.

During a morning meeting with county health officers, Agriculture Director Leo Giacometto and Health Director Bob Robinson unveiled a formal memorandum of agreement between their departments for oversight of the cleanup — and announced a strict timetable for issuing a cleanup order.

More than a year ago, tests of ground water and soil at the Scott Street mill showed high levels of pentachlorophenol and dioxin contamination. Pollution in the aquifer below the mill exceeded drinking water standards by 1,000 times.

The chemicals spilled and leaked over many decades of use at the window sash company, but are no longer used. The contamination was discovered, in fact, when underground storage tanks were removed.

Last week, county environmental health supervisor Peter Nielsen complained that the state Agriculture Department — which has authority over the cleanup because pentachlorophenol is a pesticide — was botching the job and further endangering the ground water.

On orders from Gov. Marc Racicot, state agriculture and health officers met on Friday and again over the weekend to put into writing a stronger response to the contamination. They signed the memorandum of agreement Monday morning on a plane flight to Missoula.

In their face-to-face with local health officers, Robinson and Giacometto agreed to issue a draft compliance order to White

Pine by Dec. 22, followed by a public hearing on Jan. 5 and a final order by Jan. 27.

Previously, agriculture officials insisted that the best approach was to negotiate a consent agreement with the company, rather than to issue a unilateral order.

Also by Dec. 22, the state Department of Health will notify White Pine that it is legally the "responsible party" for cleanup under the Comprehensive Environmental Cleanup and Responsibility Act, the state Superfund law.

That not only will force White Pine to pay for all costs related to the contamination, but also will subject the cleanup to

rigorous environmental standards.

Also significant was the state's agreement Monday to conduct a risk assessment of the site and surrounding North Side neighborhood. Robinson said a private contractor will determine the risks of exposure to the contamination so the cleanup can be designed to best protect public health.

"We do not want a continued health risk even after the cleanup is complete," Robinson said.

And while they had balked at the same suggestion in months past, agriculture officials agreed to analyze alternative cleanup options — not just the one, on-site biological treatment plan preferred by White Pine — and promised to conduct a full assessment of soil contamination under Scott Street, in residential yards and in shallow soils at the mill.

Dioxin monitoring also will be required, Giacometto said, and cleanup standards will be developed for dioxin.

The specifics will be determined by a new task force of experts from state and local health and agriculture agencies, including the state's top people in

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health risk assessment, hydrogeology, groundwater contamination assessment, hazardous waste disposal and community water supplies.

County health officers will be included in the task force.

Giacometto, in fact, apologized for leaving Missoula County out

of recent meetings that left the Agriculture Department with lead agency authority for the cleanup.

City-county Health Director Ellen Leahy liked what she heard.

"Clearly, this agreement strengthens the health role. This is such a highly specialized and complex site that we wanted the state Health Department brought into the picture.

Missoula City Councilwoman Linda Tracy said North Side

residents have been unhappy with the state's oversight to date

"because we are told one thing and then something else happens that we didn't expect." There also

have been long delays between the time soil and groundwater samples were taken and test results were made public.

The new work plan "helps rebuild some of the public trust that has eroded," Tracy said.

Mountain Water Co. general manager Arvid Hiller also expressed optimism about the turnaround. His company shut down its drinking water well at Dickens and Defoe streets because of a test that showed pentachlorophenol contamination.

And while the company was able to supply North Side customers with water from cleaner parts of town, it still has incurred expenses without reimbursement. Now Mountain Water customers must pay for contamination they did not create, Hiller said.

"We like the commitment we see now," Leahy added. "We appreciate that when Bob Robinson says he will put the force of his department behind something, he does. I can see that."

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