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 overseeing 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 10,000 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 to the state Agriculture Department — which has authority over the cleanup because pentachlorophenol is a pesticide — that it was 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 Compensation Act, the state Superfund law.

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