

Guest Commentary
For The Joplin Globe
March 31, 2004

An unprecedented collaboration of local, tribal, state and federal entities recently met with interested residents of the Tar Creek communities to discuss the coordinated efforts now underway to clean up the entirety of the massive old mining area.

Most of those in attendance were supportive and appreciative of the cooperative efforts of the public bodies that have come together to hear their concerns, answer their questions, and discuss their ideas and suggestions.

Unfortunately, the resulting news coverage virtually ignored the positive progress achieved during the meeting and instead focused on the views of those few who were critical of the effort.

What's missing from the reporting was (and is) the recognition of the broad support for our mission to eliminate chat piles; plug and fill mine shafts, caverns and caves; restore the water to a healthy condition; remediate the remaining surface properties to remove lead contamination from exposure to the public, and make the communities safe, healthy, and prosperous places to live.

Although clever comments from critics make provocative sound bites and headlines such as "United approach doubted", they also result in misleading conclusions when the whole news report is built around such rhetoric.

While someone might get some laughs from a derisive jab at public servants, such as "bureaucratic love fest", that sort of distraction serves no useful purpose. Likewise, self-serving criticism of the process of developing the best solutions for the complex challenges at Tar Creek is of no real benefit. Reporters, though, seem to like the controversial nature of a few naysayers joining the discussion.

When I first assumed my duties at EPA about a year ago, most of what I heard was complaints that not enough was being done. I was faced with criticism that the various federal and state agencies were not working together, that there was duplication of efforts, waste of money, lack of progress, and that the community was tired of hearing about any more "studies" or "plans."

Now that those issues have been addressed, the new complaint is that we are moving ahead too rapidly, that we should do some more "studies", and that we do not have a good "plan."

The realities are these: We don't yet have all the answers and solutions but they will come as the federal, state, tribal and local coalition moves forward with its work. Such work is led by top scientists, engineers, academicians, health/medical professionals, management officials and others – many with a long history of experience at Tar Creek.

The health, safety and welfare of the people in the area is our most important concern. Nothing will be done without appropriate measures, practices, and protections in place to proceed with the work without creating new risks.

To suggest otherwise is wrong -- wrong for those who would deliberately obstruct progressive clean up efforts and wrong for the media that should be providing accurate and balanced descriptions of what is taking place.

A handwritten signature in blue ink, appearing to read "Richard Greene". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Richard Greene
Regional Administrator
U. S. Environmental Protection Agency