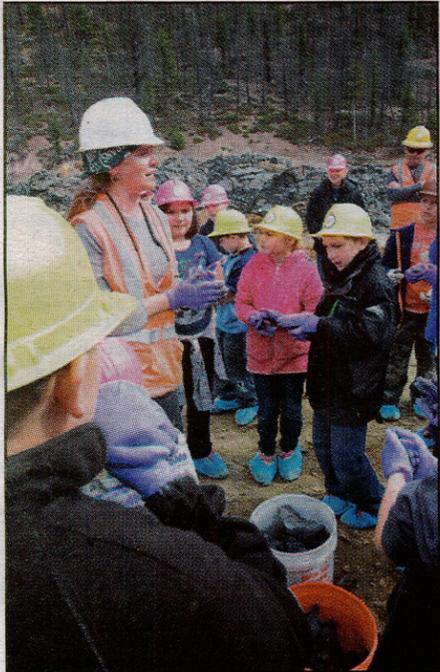


# Mike Horse tour gives students, area residents chance to learn about waste removal, see progress of clean up



Story, photos by Roger Dey  
BVD Editor

Wearing blue booties over their shoes and purple rubber gloves to protect them from the arsenic, lead, zinc and cadmium that contaminates the old mine tailings, more than 20 Lincoln grade schoolers and their teachers had the chance last Wednesday, Oct. 8., to handle the pliable material being moved from the Mike Horse tailing impoundment in Bear Trap Canyon to the mine waste repository along Highway 279, seven miles to the west.

The kids formed the material into various shapes, seeing how it changes from a PlayDoh like consistency to a solid mass as it dries, and learned the fine-grained mill tailings they were holding came from numerous mines that honeycomb the hills at the headwaters of the Blackfoot River and that the metals in the gray mud have contaminated the creek below Mike Horse Dam, preventing any fish or insects from living there.

Shellie Haaland, the Montana Department of Environmental Quality's construction manager for the cleanup project, led the group about halfway down the edge of the impoundment to get a look at the excavations in Bear Trap Canyon. The contrast between the dark gray tailings and the brown native soil revealed where and how the original contour of the canyon is being uncovered by the reclamation work.

In addition to the school kids, the tour gave neighbors who live near the mine area and the repository a chance to see how the project is progressing. Enie Fisher, Dennis Bordeleau and Bob Zuelke trailed along with the school kids. All three have property in the area and definite opinions about the project.

"I'm just glad we're finally in the production end of it," Fisher said. "It's been many, many, many years waiting and trying to learn what needs to be done and we've gone through a lot of processes to learn what needs to be done, but it



▲ Enie Fisher, Bob Zuelke and Dennis Bordeleau walk along the Mike Horse impoundment access road. The three are residents of the Mike Horse mine area and repository.

▼ Lincoln grade school students have the opportunity to handle some of the mine waste, form the Mike Horse impoundment, with rubber gloves on for protection.

◀ Lincoln students get a first hand look at the excavations at the Mike Horse impoundment.



doesn't always fit into everybody's plan on how they want to live."

For Fisher, the project literally hits close to home. She lives across Highway 279 from Section 35, where the mine waste repository is located. In early discussions about the repository site, she initially questioned the decision to build it there. She felt a possible solution could be to return the mine waste to the empty adits throughout the Mike Horse area, but learned that water running through the shafts would continue to carry contaminants into the watershed.

Fisher said she's spent plenty of time visiting the repository during its construction and feels the Forest Service and DEQ are doing the best that can be done.

"Once you start seeing what's being done and you keep on top of it...I keep on top of it on a daily basis...I think we're very, very fortunate to have the ability to understand exactly what this all means, and what it's doing to prepare for these children who are here right now, (for) their futures," she said. "This is gonna be a clean area

again, which never was. Not in their lifetime, not in my lifetime."

As the closest neighbor to the mine area, living along Highway 200 just a few hundred yard west of the headwaters area, Bordeleau remains unconvinced that moving the waste was the best option, calling it "nuts." He feels it would have been better to encapsulate it in place. "Why would you take one mound of crap and move it to another spot and make another pile of crap?" he asked.

His major concern has always been the impact, both in terms of noise and possible inadvertent contamination of the trucks hauling the waste right past his front yard. Some quick math before the tour began revealed that trucks hauling about 40 cubic yards of waste per trip will require roughly 20,000 trips between 2014 and 2017 to move all the contaminated material from the mine area to the repository, so it's a concern Haaland and Helena Sand and Gravel, the contractors removing and hauling the waste from the impoundment, don't take lightly.

Despite his reservations,

Bordeleau admits the state has bent over backwards to treat him well. "They're doing a good job of it and it looks like they're trying to do it right, so lets get 'er done," he said. "We lost the battle so, what the hell, lets go on."

"It's just unbelievable how many truckloads its gonna take," said Zuelke, a Great Falls resident who owns a cabin in the area. Like Bordeleau, he wonders about the wisdom of moving the contaminated material to a new site, but also appreciates that something is finally being done.

This year, nearly 45,000 cubic yard of waste have been moved to the repository. Eddie Roatch, the superintendent with Helena Sand and Gravel, said they plan to continue haul until Nov. 1. By the end of next years construction season the projects second phase should be complete. They expect to have 330,000 cubic yards of waste moved to the repository, with the Mike Horse impoundment and dam stripped away completely, and the Bear Trap Creek once again flowing down the bottom of the canyon.

Haaland said that between the final \$1.4 million cost of the first phase of repository construction and a bid price of \$7.165 million for all of the work in the mining area and the continued construction of the repository, 40 percent of the project should be completed for less than \$8 million, out of the \$39 million settlement from ARCO and Asarco in 2008.