CFAC Community Liaison Panel
Meeting Minutes

Date: March 5, 2025
Time: 6:06 – 8:03 p.m.
Location: The Hub Downtown, 533 1st Ave E, Columbia Falls, MT 59912
Facilitator: Kristine Fife, Big Sky Public Relations

1. Call to Order

- Meeting called to order at 6:06 PM by Kristine Fife.
- Acknowledgment of absent panel members.

2. Introductions

- **Kristine Fife (Big Sky Public Relations)** – Managing community outreach and communications on behalf of CFAC.
- **Panel Members Present:**
    - Steve Wright – Former CFAC Employee
    - Tama Hader – Columbia Falls Resident
    - Toby Liechti – Civil Engineer, Board of Health
    - Brad Abell – Flathead County Commissioner
    - Don Barnhart – Mayor of Columbia Falls, committee member since inception
    - Mitchell Morgan – Representative, U.S. Senator Tim Sheehy's Office
    - Steve Howke – District Director, Congressman Zinke's Office
    - Franz Ingelfinger– Area Biologist, Montana Fish, Wildlife & Parks
- **Other Attendees:**
    - **John Stroiazzo** – Project Manager for CFAC
    - **Cheryl Driscoll** – CFAC Representative
    - **EPA Representatives:**
        - Matt Dorrington – EPA Project Manager
        - Carolina Blue – EPA Supervisor
        - Layla Landeros – New EPA Hire
    - **Montana Department of Environmental Quality:**
        - Dick Sloan – State Project Officer

3. Purpose of the Panel

- The panel is designed to bring together community representatives, elected officials, and stakeholders to discuss project updates, provide input, and ensure diverse community representation.

4. Housekeeping & Ground Rules

- Agenda and supporting documents provided.
- Panel members encouraged to:

- Speak one at a time.
- Seek equal input from all members.
- Maintain respect and honesty.
- Adhere to scheduled meeting times.

5. Project Updates – John Stroiazzo

- **Record of Decision (ROD) Issued (January 2025):**
  - The EPA has finalized the remediation plan.
  - The main concerns are groundwater contamination and soil remediation.
- **Remediation Plan Includes:**
  1. **Slurry Wall Construction** – Containment of contaminated materials.
  2. **Soil Remediation** – Excavation of contaminated soils, placement in a containment cell with on-site capping.
  3. **Landfill Capping & Remediation** – Additional landfill areas to be addressed as needed.
  4. **Cedar Creek Dam Bypass Ditch Lining** – Preventing contamination of groundwater.

- **Project Scope & Timeline**:
  - The cleanup will take place over the next 3-5 years within a 200-acre area.
  - Initial phases include pre-design work, detailed surveys, and legal agreements.
- **Current & Upcoming Work**:
  - Detailed survey work has been conducted for engineers to finalize design parameters.
  - The pre-design phase involves gathering additional data to determine specifications for the slurry wall (depth, width, materials, etc.).
  - Engineers will conduct geotechnical investigations, including drilling and soil sampling.
  - Extensive water sampling will be done to design a long-term monitoring program.
- **Legal & Regulatory Process**:
  - A Consent Decree will be negotiated between Columbia Falls Aluminum and the U.S. EPA, outlining legal obligations, financial assurances, and procedural requirements.
  - This legal process may take time but is essential for moving forward.
- **Design & Implementation**:
  - The design phase will include three review periods, with oversight from MDEQ and the EPA.
  - The estimated timeline for completion is 4.5–5 years, with a project cost of approximately $57 million.
  - The slurry wall construction and soil cleanup are expected to take two seasons (up to two years).
- **Community Engagement**:
  - Future updates will be provided at council meetings and public sessions.
  - The project team seeks input from the community on how they would like to stay informed.

- **Next Steps**:
    - Legal finalization of the Consent Decree.
    - Field data collection and pre-design work.
    - Ongoing community engagement as the project progresses.

- **Implementation of the Remediation Plan:**
    - Moving from study phase to design and construction.
    - Collaboration between CFAC, EPA, and DEQ.
    - Long-term monitoring to ensure effectiveness.
- **Community Engagement & Communications:**
    - Review past engagement efforts.
    - Discuss improvements for future outreach and information dissemination.

Meeting Q&A Summary

1. **Redevelopment Scope & Timeline**
    - Unaffected areas can be redeveloped immediately, as municipal water and sewage are available.
    - Development is at the discretion of the developer.
2. **Water & Sewage Infrastructure**
    - A large municipal water main and a 2-million-gallon water tank are in place.
    - Permits are available for extending water services across the railroad tracks.
3. **Construction Timeline & Seasonality**
    - Construction is weather-dependent, likely pausing during winter months (December-March).
    - Full construction is expected to take two seasons.
    - The estimated timeline for project completion is 4-5 years, with major construction beginning in approximately two years.
4. **Water Treatment Facility**
    - A contingency plan is in place for potential groundwater contamination.
    - If necessary, a small-scale treatment plant using reverse osmosis will be installed within the containment area.
    - Design plans account for treatment needs before construction begins.
5. **Slurry Wall Explanation**
    - A slurry wall is a containment method that prevents groundwater from passing through contaminated material.
    - It involves digging a trench around the site, filling it with a sealing mixture (likely bentonite clay), and capping it to create an impermeable barrier.
    - The wall is designed to be flexible and resilient against seismic activity.
6. **Regulatory Approval Process**
    - The project required a consent Decree lead by the U.S. Department of Justice, EPA, and state authorities.
    - Once finalized, a 30-day public comment period will be held before federal judge approval, possibly including a public hearing.
7. **Property and Health Concerns**

- A resident inquired about potential risks to their property and health due to upcoming remediation work.
- Officials confirmed that the resident's location is west of the affected area and outside the groundwater contamination zone.
- Extensive surface water and groundwater testing has shown no contamination in Cedar Creek.

8. **EPA Involvement and Project Continuation**

- Concerns were raised about the impact of federal budget cuts on the EPA's ability to continue work.
- EPA representatives assured attendees that the project remains a priority, with both federal and state agencies committed to its completion.
- It was clarified that project funding comes from CFAC, not federal sources, ensuring continuity.

9. **Health Risk Assessments and Future Development**

- A question was raised about health studies in potentially unaffected areas.
- Officials confirmed that human health and ecological risk assessments have been conducted per EPA guidelines, with no identified risks.
- The Montana Department of Health and Human Services is finalizing an evaluation of health risks, expected in the coming months.

10. **Groundwater Concerns and Remediation Monitoring**

- Questions arose regarding underground aquifers and how remediation work might impact groundwater flow.
- Officials explained that contamination is confined to shallow groundwater and attenuates before reaching the river.
- 77 monitoring wells have been installed, and additional wells will be added during remediation to track groundwater quality.
- The project will include continuous water quality monitoring, with results being published periodically.

11. **Public Transparency and Data Reporting**

- Attendees requested regular public updates on water quality during and after remediation.
- Officials committed to exploring ways to share data in a timely and accessible manner, while ensuring accuracy through proper validation processes.
- The EPA and MDEQ will oversee the monitoring, and results will be made available through public reports and an official website.

12. **Next Steps**

- The project team is working on a detailed monitoring plan, with ongoing assessments and data collection.
- Community input is encouraged to determine preferred reporting formats and meeting frequencies.
- Officials reiterated their commitment to ensuring the remediation is effective and transparent.

13. **Well Depth & Monitoring:**
    - Wells will be at various depths, but decisions on exact locations and numbers will be made during the design phase.
    - The lower aquifer remains uncontaminated and is being monitored through existing wells.
14. **Development in Unaffected Areas:**
    - Areas outside the designated contamination zone can be developed.
    - If new contamination concerns arise, existing monitoring and remediation measures will ensure protection.
15. **Long-Term Contaminant Monitoring:**
    - Continuous monitoring will be conducted, with a focus on cyanide and fluoride.
    - Other contaminants will be assessed based on historical data and regulatory guidance.
    - Some contaminated soil areas will be excavated as part of remediation efforts.
16. **Containment Strategy & Engineering Considerations:**
    - A slurry wall will be constructed to contain contamination and prevent groundwater spread.
    - The lower aquifer remains isolated, with no detected contamination.
    - Engineers will determine the best material sourcing and construction sequencing for the slurry wall.
17. **Financial & Legal Aspects (ARCO's Role):**
    - ARCO, responsible for 35% of costs per court ruling, has been making required payments.
    - They do not actively participate in decision-making but are legally bound to contribute to cleanup efforts.
18. **Construction & Implementation Plan:**
    - Engineers will finalize design details, including sequencing of the slurry wall installation.
    - The wall will be installed in sections, with measures in place to prevent contamination spread.
    - A qualified engineering firm with expertise in slurry walls has been engaged for the project.
19. **Containment Cells & Slurry Wall**
    - The proposed solution includes one slurry wall.
    - It will encompass an area of approximately 4,000 feet in diameter.
20. **Movement of Contaminants**
    - The plan includes relocating contaminants, including materials from the wet scrubber sludge pond, into the containment area.

    - A stability analysis will be conducted before relocation to ensure the sludge pond can support the weight.
21. **Redevelopment Possibilities**
    - The site will be zoned for commercial and industrial use, with restrictions on groundwater extraction.
    - Development is possible with city water and sewer connections.
22. **Environmental & Public Safety Information**
    - All environmental data, including soil and water sampling results, are available on the website.
    - The EPA and relevant agencies ensure regulatory compliance and public safety.
23. **Future Appearance & Land Use**
    - The site will maintain a natural aesthetic with grass and vegetation, blending with the surroundings.
    - Recreational use, such as walking trails, may be possible, but motorized vehicle access (e.g., ATVs) will be restricted.
24. **Potential Uses for the Landfill Area**
    - Open space use, including parks, sports complexes, and even golf courses, is a possibility.
    - Any development must meet environmental safety standards.
25. **Long-Term Responsibility & Ownership**
    - The land must remain protected indefinitely, with ongoing monitoring and maintenance.
    - Financial assurances will be established for future site management.
    - Ownership could potentially change through liability transfer mechanisms, subject to regulatory oversight.
26. **Legal & Regulatory Framework**
    - The EPA ensures long-term site protection through established Superfund site regulations.
    - Future agreements (such as the Consent Decree) will outline financial and ownership responsibilities.

Agenda & Discussion:

- The meeting progressed slightly out of order, but the final agenda item was to discuss the future structure of these meetings.
- The panel discussed meeting frequency, relevant topics, and how to communicate information between panel members and the community.

Meeting Frequency & Format:

- The panel considered two options: meeting at regular intervals (e.g., every six months) or meeting based on key milestones (e.g., completion of the consent decree negotiations).
- Consensus leaned towards milestone-based meetings to ensure discussions remain relevant.
- Some panel members suggested holding an additional meeting before the public comment period of the consent decree to ensure the community is well-informed.

Community Engagement & Communication:

- Various methods were suggested for keeping the public informed, including:
  - Newsletters
  - Emails
  - Newspaper updates
  - Updates to the project website with meeting minutes and relevant documents
  - Potential Zoom meeting options for those unable to attend in person
- The possibility of making meeting minutes available at the library was discussed, as they have been stored there in the past.

Coordination with Other Meetings:

- Concern was raised about engagement fatigue due to additional public meetings sponsored by the Coalition for a Clean CFAC through an EPA Technical Assistance Grant.

Meeting Location & Scheduling Preferences:

- The current meeting space was deemed appropriate for future meetings.
- Preferred meeting times were discussed, with an agreement to avoid Fridays.

Panel Member Responsibilities:

- Members were encouraged to review their contact information and suggest any necessary updates.
- They were reminded that their role is to facilitate open, respectful discussions and help disseminate information to the broader community.

Community Development & Future Plans:

- Mick Ruis shared plans for residential and industrial development on cleaned portions of the site.
- Discussions included potential large-scale projects, job creation, and ensuring affordable housing options for residents.

Next Steps:

- The panel will continue with milestone-driven meetings.
- Members will receive updates via email and other communication channels.
- Further coordination will take place with other public engagement efforts to optimize outreach.

The meeting concluded with a commitment to keeping the community informed and engaged.

7. Adjournment

- Meeting concluded at 8:03 p.m.
- Next meeting date to be determined.

Minutes Prepared by: Kristine Fife