

State review backs Railroad District testing

Thursday, March 11, 2010

Montana state officials

have accepted the results of a study sponsored by the city of Whitefish of an underground diesel plume caused by spills at BNSF's locomotive fueling station in Whitefish, a Superfund site, the Whitefish Pilot reports. Using \$50,000 in state grant money obtained by the city, Roger Noble and Applied Water Consulting, of Kalispell, investigated the extent of the contamination in Whitefish's Railway District and a neighborhood east of the middle school.

Eighteen direct-push soil

borings were made in a three-block area south of BNSF's locomotive fueling facility, and another seven borings were made east of Spokane Avenue. Lab results from the 25 soil-borings revealed little or no contamination from the underground diesel fuel plume, Noble reported in January.

The Montana Department of

Environmental Quality reviewed Noble's work and found that levels of extractable petroleum hydrocarbons, typically found in diesel fuel, and volatile petroleum hydrocarbons, typically found in gasoline, were "well below" risk-based screening levels.

"Based on the

analytical laboratory results, DEQ does not believe further action is warranted at this time in the areas of the Railway District that were investigated for your study," DEQ environmental science specialist Matthew Kent wrote the city on Feb. 1.

Kent spoke to property

owners, city manager Chuck Stearns and concerned citizens at the Whitefish Public Library on Feb. 25. He explained that detectable levels of contaminants at two of the boreholes were likely the result of an old furnace-fuel tank and gasoline spilled while refilling a lawnmower.

Kent was asked what could

be done to hasten a clean-up of the BNSF fuel facility, where as much as

110,000 gallons of diesel fuel remains underground. Talk turned to a letter-writing campaign and even contacting federal officials overseeing acquisition of BNSF by Warren Buffett and Berkshire Hathaway.

Talk also turned to the Environmental Protection Agency's mandated clean-up of the Whitefish River. Kent explained that the EPA was operating under the authority of the Oil Pollution Act, which focuses on oil sheen visible on the surface and enables the EPA to act more quickly, which he said was "a good thing."

BNSF's environmental consultants, Kennedy/Jenks, recently completed sampling and analysis plans for the upper and lower reaches of the Whitefish River, from north of the railroad's red roundhouse building down to the JP Road bridge. Field observations and sampling will focus primarily on the presence of "observable" petroleum floating on the surface.

One location is along the north shore of the river, where sediments were removed last year from behind a cofferdam installed below the BNSF Loop bike trail. If sheen is detected along the "cut face" in the shoreline there, and if directed by EPA, a narrow test pit will be excavated perpendicular to the river up to the high-water mark to see if petroleum exists underground "at sufficient saturation levels to drain under the influence of gravity into the test pit," Kennedy/Jenks said.

In the river's lower reach, down river of the Second Street bridge, the plan calls for sampling sediments along the shoreline in 50- to 100-foot intervals or longer as the team proceeds downstream. A hand auger or coring device will be used to disturb the sediments up to 6-12 inches deep to see if a sheen forms on the surface. Twenty-five locations, about 10 percent of the total, will be chosen for further observation and laboratory analysis.