

Smelter cleanup contested

The Associated Press

TACOMA — A proposed multi-million-dollar cleanup of contamination from a defunct copper smelter will not adequately protect their health or property values, say residents who have filed a lawsuit.

A lawsuit filed by Ruston and North Tacoma residents in U.S. District Court seeks unspecified damages. It asks the court to broaden the suit to a class action that could include as many as 4,000 residents within a two-mile radius of the former Asarco copper smelter.

The Environmental Protection Agency is expected to publish a final plan for the \$60 million to \$80 million cleanup by early May, spokeswoman Michelle Pirzadeh said.

During the planned seven-year cleanup, the residents will be exposed to increased health risks, lowered property values and the restricted use of their properties, said Thomas Burt, a Seattle attorney who brought the suit on behalf of two dozen residents.

Proposed cleanup plans want Asarco to spend as much as \$80 million to remove soil contaminated with arsenic and lead from about 525 properties surrounding the company's former Ruston smelter. Soils would be replaced by uncontaminated soils and the yards replanted.

Asarco site manager Tom Aldrich said studies have not indicated a significant health risk for those whose homes and properties which will be cleaned up.

"These people are just trying to exploit a situation for which the EPA is already prescribing an adequate remedy," he said.

The soils were contaminated by heavy metal fallout from Asarco's copper smelter, which processed high-arsenic ore from more than 80 years before closing in the mid-1980s.

The EPA believes high concentrations of lead and arsenic ingested from the soil can cause skin cancers and learning disabilities, particularly in children.

In addition to what could be millions in damages, the suit would force Asarco to set up a fund to pay for medical tests for residents who believe they may be ingesting too much contaminated soil.

Other residents are more concerned about property values dropping because of close proximity to a federal Superfund cleanup site. "We've heard stories about banks who won't finance homes in the area and about potential buyers who've been scared away," Burt said.