

Grassroots effort revives Blackwell's future hopes: Environment: EPA listed community as the most toxic site Daily Oklahoman February 11, 2007 Sunday

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Feb. 11--BLACKWELL -- Louise Akers remembers when Blackwell lived by the steam whistle.

"We all set our clocks by it," she said.

That whistle sounded every day at noon and 4 p.m. at the Blackwell Zinc Smelter, the biggest employer in a city that once was the third-largest industrial site in Oklahoma.

In 1974, the whistle fell silent. When the smelter closed, it took most of the city's jobs with it. But what it left behind could have been more devastating for the community.

However, officials said what could have been an environmental disaster has been largely averted.

Lead, cadmium and zinc built up in the soil and groundwater beneath the plant for decades as tons of ore passed through the smelter. The contamination was so extensive the site was almost placed on the Environmental Protection Agency's Superfund list of the most toxic waste sites in the nation.

In an unprecedented move, the agency deferred authority in 1994 to state and local officials, who were put in charge of the cleanup effort.

A little more than a decade later, there is little sign of the smelter's existence in Blackwell.

On top of the site where it was once hard even for grass to grow, business is thriving.

Since the site was reopened for development, 16 new companies have moved in, employing about 540 people, said Shane Frye, director of the Blackwell Industrial Authority. In a few months, that number could be closer to the 800 who were employed at the smelter during its busiest days.

"It's really a grassroots rebirth so to speak of a rural community that remains dedicated to its work force," Frye said.

Last week, two more businesses announced openings in the industrial park.

The city-owned industrial park is one of few that qualify to participate in the EPA's "brown field" program, which opens a contaminated area for redevelopment. Most contaminated sites are abandoned as "green fields," where building is prohibited.

Problems discovered

Blackwell officials didn't know the ground was contaminated until the early 1990s, when the metals started showing up at the city's sewer treatment plant. Officials soon discovered the contaminants were seeping into sewer lines that ran below the old smelter site.

Cyprus-AMAX, the company that owned the smelter at the time, paid to have soil tested for contamination and moved the contaminated soil to a contained storage site. A shallow mound of earth on the south side of the 300-acre industrial park is the only visible sign of the contaminated soil that remains.

Metal producer Phelps-Dodge, which acquired Cyprus-AMAX in 1999, is conducting a second round of testing to make sure all the contaminated soil has been accounted for, said Candy Thomas, a community outreach coordinator for the company.

The smelter operated for almost 60 years in Blackwell, producing raw zinc and lead from raw mining materials.

The process generated a lot of waste products, from sand to gravel, that were seen as valuable construction material at the time, said Paul Muegge, a former state senator who was also recruited to work on the cleanup effort.

"People didn't think anything of it," Muegge said. "I used to see people come out here and load up their pickups with sand. They used it as filler material and for landscaping all over."

A school playground was among the projects built atop the lead-rich materials, but it was closed and the soil removed.

Phelps-Dodge officials are offering to test soil for any Blackwell residents who suspect similar contaminated materials might be present at their homes.

"It wasn't something the company was required to do but thought was necessary to put people's minds at ease to make sure the soil is safe," Thomas said.

More cleanup needed

Phelps-Dodge also plans to start a cleanup of contaminated groundwater.

Later this year, the company plans to open a treatment plant adjacent to the city's wastewater plant on the Chikaskia River.

Water will be pumped from the contaminated part of the aquifer, treated to remove the metals and dumped into the river.

Muegge said no one is sure how long it could take to clean the groundwater but said the process may never really end.

"You can never clean up a contaminated site 100 percent," Muegge said. "It takes a lot longer to clean up a site like this than it does to contaminate it."

Closing was tough

When the smelter closed, many people left Blackwell to find work.

Many went to work at a smelter in Bartlesville or others left the state.

Akers said it was a major turning point for the community. The whistle from the smelter now sits in a corner of the Top of Oklahoma Historical Museum, where she volunteers part-time.

The whistle, like the community, has been a lot quieter since the plant closed.

In 1960, Blackwell's population had grown to more than 10,000 but fell to 7,600 by 2000, according to Census figures.

"It really was hard on the whole town," Akers said. "I don't know if things will ever be the same."

Her father worked at the smelter for 35 years before he retired.

Her aunt, Opal Chambers, 92, still lives in a house just south of the industrial park. Chambers' late husband, George, also worked at the smelter until he retired a few years before it closed.

"After it went down the whole town went down, too," Chambers said. "There wasn't any place for the younger men to go get a job."

Frye said the reopened industrial park is again offering a variety of skilled and unskilled jobs that were in short supply in Blackwell for several decades after the plant's closing.

He said he hopes the new development will be able to turn the tide for Blackwell, where the unemployment level is still higher than the state average.

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