Old Mine’s Prospects Uncertain

Tracey Rood walks across the coppery landscape of the Elizabeth Mine site in Strafford. She has lived near it her entire life, and now has health problems that her doctor says could conceivably be linked to pollution from the closed mine.

Health Effects and Superfund Designation Among Debated Topics in Strafford

By Jim Kenyon
Valley News Staff Writer

She was climbing the front steps of her three-bedroom trailer, reaching for the doorknob with one hand, clutching her side with the other.

The throbbing pain radiating from her kidneys would not go away. That morning, like many others in the last eight months, she noticed blood in her urine. The doctors keep running tests, but so far they cannot pinpoint the problem.

Tracey Rood is 29 years old and has lived near the abandoned Elizabeth copper mine in South Strafford for most of her life. As a child, she drank the water from her family’s well, which bordered the mine. She ate the wild blueberries that grew on top of the mine. She played in the rust-colored dirt dug from the earth for 150 years by miners, whose ranks included her grandfather and great-grandfather.

No one can say that living so close to a hazardous waste site is causing her health problems. Yet, no one can say for certain that the mine has not played a role in Rood’s current illness, or why her teeth are so brittle that six have needed replacing.

“She’s very young to be having some of the problems she has,” said her physician, Thomas Parrott.

Rood’s symptoms have always been a little unusual. Parrott said, and his curiosity was piqued when he saw newspaper stories on pollution emanating from the mine. It made him wonder: Is her illness connected to the mine? Is her health problem related to the mine? Is it conceivable that the health problems Rood is having are related to the environment playing a role in her condition?

Medical tests have not shown a connection, but it is conceivable that the health problems Rood is having are the result of contact with toxic substances from the mine during her childhood, he said.

“To put the whole issue to rest and give her a chance to regain her health, she needs to be in a different environment,” said Parrott, part of the Superfund designation.

Sources: Giovanna Smith of the Strafford Historical Society and Colamer Abbott, author of Green Mountain Copper. The Story of Vermont’s Red Metal Information.

See EcoWatch — A6

John Freitag of the Strafford Historical Society is among those opposed to Superfund designation.

First of Two Parts

Valley News — Dylan R. Coker
Workers at the Elizabeth copper mine posed for this photograph in 1988.

Photograph Courtesy of the STRAFFORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY

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White River Family Practice in Wilder.

Problems arising out of mining were from the mine might be the answer, Rood, said, "but I can't afford it."

Estimates for cleaning up the mine range from $7 million to $12 million. The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has indicated it will do the job if Strafford agrees to become a Superfund site, a prospect some in town oppose. It would be the first time that a New England mine was declared a Superfund site in the program's 20-year history.

At the EPA, the agency's Boston-based regional office has made frequent visits to Strafford since spring, conducting tests at the mine and on area rivers and streams. The EPA budgeted $500,000 for the first-ever comprehensive study of the mine, and two weeks ago the agency announced that more money will be used up this fall. Unless Strafford is willing to join the Superfund list, EPA officials say, they will have to pull the plug on the study before it is completed.

Although not everyone in Strafford has made food and the conversations it sparks. The cafe hosts Friday night performances by poets and singer-songwriters John Kenneth Galbraith and former Clinton labor producer. The town's historical society and another Superfund opponent.

Just because the EPA has indicated it will pay for the clean up, does not mean Strafford residents should not question the plan, Freitag said last week. "The EPA is doing the town's school bus and worked as the school janitor.

The EPA underestimated how much people care in this area," said Freitag, president of the town's historical society and another Superfund opponent.

SABOTAGE IN 1996, the New England Interstate Water Pollution Control Commission cited the Elizabeth mine as among the worst threats to the health of the Connecticut River watershed. The mine closed in 1958, but continues to leach copper and other metals into tiny Coppersak Brook, which flows into the West Branch of the Ompompanoosuc River. The Ompompanoosuc eventually empties into the Connecticut River.

The acid runoff from the mine has created "essentially a dead zone in the Ompompanoosuc River" for quite a few mine's tailings," said Cornell Abbot, who discussed the EPA cleanup proposal during a news conference this spring. There is no scientific research that proves the mine is to blame, said Novick, the Vermont Law School professor. The West Branch of Ompompanoosuc is a considered poor stream for fishing partly because of high temperatures and high levels of minerals. But those water quality problems exist in the section of the river above the mine as well, he said, below it.

For the Copper River, Novick argued that "copper from natural sources is high throughout the area" so again the pollution problem cannot be pinned on the mine.

Government environmentalists, however, keep pointing to the mine as the source of pollution in nearby streams and rivers.

Copperas Brook has virtually no fish or insects due to the presence of metals coming from "mine tailings," Vermont environmental officials recently announced. There are no fish, said Novick, of the mine as the source of pollution in nearby streams and rivers.

In recent public meetings, one woman described how her children were born with birth defects. She filled plastic jugs at her parents and lugs them home. She won't even allow her 6-year-old daughter to play in the mine tailings ponds. They lug it to Kool-Aid or orange juice concentrate to improve the taste.

She doesn't live in Strafford, but she fills her plastic jugs at home.

"I don't know yet," Judy said. "There could have been illegal dumping before."

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The siting of the mine's neighbors, told those at the meeting that three children among the families who have had genetic tests of "90 percent of the time," she said, finding back tears.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services is reviewing potential health hazards from the mine tailings pond.

Testing has shown that one well is contaminated, containing levels of metals beyond federal safe drinking standards. The well is located at the trailer with the failed septic system.

Rood's family lived on that lot — and drank from that well — when she was a young girl. But since then there are no records of the well being tested back then, there is no way to tell if the water quality is better or worse today, said Ed Cashaw, EPA project manager for the mine.

Regardless of the quality, Rood said the water never tasted right. Her family would mix tap water with Kool-Aid or orange juice concentrate to improve the taste. Rood and others who still live near the mine say drinking tap water is like sucking on pennies.

The EPA has already required the town to begin leasing the mine tailings pond for fish. They lug it to Kool-Aid or orange juice concentrate to improve the taste.

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Workers at the Elizabeth copper mine posed for this photograph in 1888.

PHOTOGRAPH COURTESY OF THE STRAFFORD HISTORICAL SOCIETY

Strafford: Prospects for Cleanup Uncertain

1. **The Road Leading to the Mine**

   The mine site is located in the town of Strafford, New Hampshire, and is accessible via a dirt road that winds through the surrounding forest. The road is narrow and unpaved, and is often muddy in the spring and wet in the fall.

2. **The Mine Operations**

   The mine was active from the late 1800s to the early 1900s, and was one of the largest copper mines in the United States. The mine produced copper, iron, and other minerals, and was operated by several mining companies over the years.

3. **The Environmental Impact**

   The mine operations have had a significant impact on the surrounding environment. The mine tailings have contaminated the waterways and streams in the area, and residents have reported health problems associated with exposure to the mine's chemicals.

4. **The Cleanup Process**

   The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) has identified the mine as a Superfund site, and has been working with the site's owners to clean up the contamination. The cleanup process has been slow and controversial, and has been plagued by cost overruns and delays.

About the Superfund

Q: What is the Superfund?

A: The Superfund, also known as the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation and Liability Act, was created in 1980 to address the nation's worst toxic waste sites. The program is funded through taxes on industries that produce hazardous waste.

Q: How did the program get started?

A: The Superfund law was part of a larger effort to address the nation's environmental problems. In recent years, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has been successful in getting "responsible parties" to conduct cleanups at about 70 percent of Superfund sites. In the case of Elizabeth Mine in Strafford, it appears all the companies that operated at the site are no longer in business.

Q: If no "responsible parties" can be found, who pays?

A: Under EPA rules, current landowners of a hazardous waste site can be required to pay for a cleanup. Although no guarantees have been given, EPA officials say that it is not their intention to use the Superfund for this purpose.

Q: Who pays for the cleanup?

A: The idea behind the program is that polluters — not taxpayers — should be responsible for cleaning up their own waste. In recent years, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has succeeded in getting "responsible parties" to conduct cleanups at about 70 percent of Superfund sites. In the case of Elizabeth Mine in Strafford, it appears all the companies that operated at the site are no longer in business.

Q: Are there any recent developments?

A: The road leading to the mine is still unpaved and narrow, and it is often difficult to get to. The mine itself is now closed, and the waterways that flow through it are no longer contaminated.

Q: What are some of the health problems associated with the mine?

A: The mine has caused health problems among people who live near it. The waterways that flow through the mine are contaminated, and the contamination has been found in the mine tailings.

Q: Is the mine still an active site?

A: The mine is now closed, and the waterways that flow through it are no longer contaminated. The mine tailings have been cleaned up, and the mine is no longer an active site.

Q: What is the future of the mine?

A: The future of the mine is uncertain. The mine is now closed, and the waterways that flow through it are no longer contaminated. The mine tailings have been cleaned up, and the mine is no longer an active site.