

Don't forsake the lake now

Some folks are acting like the Coeur d'Alene Lake Management Plan just sped through town and left without offering to punch their tickets.

The train actually started huffing and puffing a full quarter century ago.

Back in 1983, the federal Environmental Protection Agency slapped the most ominous moniker on the Bunker Hill Mining and Metallurgical Complex in the Silver Valley: They labeled it a Superfund site.

Technically, Lake Coeur d'Alene has been spared that demoralizing, bad-for-business designation, but only because disparate parties have worked together for years, drafting a plan that would solve metals-related contamination problems under local, tribal and state, rather than federal, control.

In short, our precious lake would be the most spectacular Superfund centerpiece in U.S. history were it not for these local efforts and federal acceptance. And it is a fact that if local efforts falter, the federal cleanup agency will step in, declare Lake Coeur d'Alene a Superfund target area and wrest all control of the project away.

For those who aren't worried about the stigma of living in a Superfund site, talk to all the folks in the Silver Valley who saw property values and community spirit plummet during the long years of site remediation. Granted, like some of Colorado's most prestigious mountain resorts, the Silver Valley is rebounding nicely, but it has taken years to grow beyond the deep shadows cast by Superfund designation.

Coeur d'Alene and the surrounding area can avoid that, thanks to the tens of thousands of hours devoted by a consortium of various interests: the Coeur d'Alene Tribe, the Idaho Department of Environmental Quality, regional energy company Avista, homeowners' groups, city and county governments, as well as other individuals and business interests. We are today endowed with a draft Lake Management Plan that has been the object of numerous official comments. Those comments will be analyzed later this week and then be incorporated as deemed appropriate into the final 2008 Coeur d'Alene Lake Management Plan.

The train mustn't be derailed now. Those who say they feel disenfranchised or left out of the process should understand that under difficult, politically and sometimes personally charged conditions, key players did their best to create a practical, equitable plan for protecting and even improving lake water quality. *TRIBE + DEQ ONLY*

Time and effort will be better spent figuring out how to implement the final plan and how to pay for the daunting work that lies ahead. Because if we fail now, the hammer known as Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act — Superfund — is poised to fall.