

Hazardous Materials

Cleaning up and keeping clean

By Tasha Anderson

On October 19 a nine-year cleanup effort came to conclusion at the Jodhpur Motorcross Park in Anchorage's Kincaid Park. Joe Meehan, Lands & Refuge program coordinator for the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, says that over the course of the cleanup he estimates they've hauled out eighty to one hundred whole or partial cars; two thousand tires; and one hundred tons of other debris. He says, "That's been everything from old motorcycles and four wheelers to refrigerators, ovens, freezers, and microwave ovens to porta potties and out houses. You name it, it's been dumped."

Meehan explains that in the 60s the area where the motorcross is now located was a gravel pit; after the 1964 Alaska Earthquake, the pit was a city-sanctioned dumping ground for vehicles and other items damaged during the quake. "They were pushing the waste sand that they didn't want over [the bluff] with the vehicles, so most of the vehicles are buried in the bluff and out of sight."

Meehan estimates that thousands of cars are still buried at the motorcross, and there they'll remain. The focus of the cleanup was not to remove these buried vehicles but other dumped debris that was either exposed in the side of the bluff or had made their way into the marsh between the bluff and the Cook Inlet. "Our primary emphasis was first to get rid of everything in the marsh, all of the vehicles, all of the tires, because that's the most important habitat," he says.

Legal dumping ended in the area in the 70s, but "it used to be the Wild West out here," Meehan says, and illegal dumping, bonfires, and target practice had taken place in the area for years. He says the last illegal car dump was five or six years ago. He gives much of the credit for the change to the Municipality Parks and Recreation Department and the Anchorage Racing Lions, a local nonprofit that maintains the Jodhpur Motorcross Park for off-road use April through September. "They've been



Photo by ABM Staff

A helicopter prepares to lift debris from the bottom of the bluff at the Jodhpur Motorcross Park in Anchorage, the culmination of a nine-year cleanup project conducted by the Alaska Department of Fish and Game, Lands & Refuge.

managing this area much better: they've put in gates and have restricted hours and actually manage it, so it stopped the lawlessness and illegal activity," Meehan says.

Meehan clarifies that he is actually responsible for maintaining the Anchorage Coastal Wildlife Refuge and wouldn't normally perform a project in a municipal park, but the bottom of the bluff is in the refuge and "whatever erodes out of the park ends up in the refuge I manage." He says the project was funded years ago by the Alaska Legislature, but he hasn't actually needed to use all of the funds allocated due to the generosity of Anchorage businesses donating equipment and personnel. For instance, Granite Construction brought in a bulldozer, road grader, and excavator which, along with an 18-wheeler side dump truck, were driven out on the frozen marsh in the winter to perform some of the work. Meehan says Beek's Contracting also donated heavy equipment and staff for the project.

Work on the final day of cleanup was completed by a helicopter at the cost of \$1,700, which Meehan says is the largest single expense the project has had in terms of actual cleanup. The cargo netting and cinch straps used on the final day were provided at a reduced price by Arctic Wire Rope and Supply. Owner Eric McCallum and his wife Robin were onsite to take pictures and ended up volunteering to unload some of the nets that were too heavily loaded. McCallum says providing support to a cleanup project such as this exemplifies the values of the company. "Instead of just talking about it, you try to do it."

Meehan says the bulk of the money for the project was spent to hire Shannon & Wilson, Inc. to do an engineering assessment of the landfill: "what's in it and what's the threat of this whole bluff just slumping down into the marsh" and what could be done to stabilize the landfill and bluff. "They're pretty confident another big earthquake isn't going to send the whole thing crashing down," Meehan says. "But we do want to stabilize the gully and a couple of other points along the toe of the bluff."

He estimates that stabilization process will cost "something shy of \$1 million." Funding is not currently secure for the stabilization, so Meehan could not provide a timeline of when it may take place. "As far as the clean-up, this is it," he says. He says it's fortunate that most of the removed material is metal, as all of the metal debris is being recycled.

What is a hazardous material?

Rusting metal and automotive chemicals aren't the only types of hazardous waste. Peter Beardsley, PE, CEA, is the Environ-

mental Engineering program manager for NORTECH, Inc. He says, "There's a lot of different definitions of hazardous materials, and in a way we deal with all of them. Our approach is to say either we can deal with it or we know someone that can."

NORTECH, Inc. provides a range of engineering services from environmental assessments and investigations to energy audits and retro-commissioning buildings. Beardsley is based in the company's home office in Fairbanks, and the company also has locations in Juneau and Anchorage.

Beardsley says that when NORTECH is approached for a project, mostly com-

monly they encounter hazardous building materials, such as lead paint, PCBs and lights, asbestos, etc., which pose a threat to human health. "We're sort of a specialty demolition design contractor, and a portion of our expertise is hazardous materials assessments."

But Beardsley raises the point that many hazardous materials are really only classified as hazardous the moment they become waste materials. "Even in our building there's probably half a dozen things that, as they're installed, aren't hazardous." He gives the example of asbestos shingles that can be used for exterior siding, which he



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says is probably the longest-lasting, most durable siding there is. "If it's installed on your building, it's not a hazard until you want to use different siding."

He says some materials become waste simply through time—for example gasoline. After thirty days of sitting, gasoline can be termed "old gas," which can foul up an engine's operation, such as in an outboard motor like those used in many rural communities statewide. If the gas is old and can't be used, many residents have only two options: store a useless, flammable material or illegally dump it. "That's an example of something you buy, you use it every day, and when you go to dispose of it in any way other than using it the way it was intended it becomes a problem," Beardsley says. Refrigerants are another good example, though he says in the case of Freon the danger isn't as much a human health risk as it's hazardous to the ozone. "It's more of an environmental hazard than a direct human health hazard," he says.

Another aspect of what is hazardous is the question, hazardous to whom? "DEC and their clean-up levels are such that one person in hundred thousand is going to have a negative impact," Beardsley says. He gives an example of a client who had "multiple chemical sensitivity disorder,"

meaning she would have negative reactions to chemicals or smells that fall well within EPA or DEC standards of safety. Unfortunately, the DEC was unable to address her issue, essentially responding that although she was getting sick, the regulations had been met.

The state of the hazardous material is also a factor. Beardsley says that wet paint is a hazardous waste material but dry paint, unless it has lead in it, can be disposed like any other benign material. "[Wet paint] is pretty expensive to get rid of—in the range of \$800 to \$1000 a drum. Or you can just take the paint and paint the same piece of plastic or wood of whatever you want until you're out of paint and throw that away," Beardsley says. "It's not hazardous anymore."

Hazardous Surprises

It can be difficult to accurately estimate the scope of a hazardous materials project. From January to July NORTECH worked in Wrangell on a state remediation project with NRC Alaska. "An automotive junkyard there back in the 60s, 70s, 80s, and into the 90s would recycle car batteries and boat batteries by smashing them, draining the acid out onto the ground, and then smelting the lead down in pits to make fish-

ing weights. You can imagine this was kind of an environmental disaster."

By 2000 the city had foreclosed on the property and most of the cars had been hauled out. While it was known that the land was contaminated with lead, "nobody knew the extent until we started digging," Beardsley says. The project had anticipated removing four thousand cubic yards of contaminated material; the actual contaminated material was approximately eighteen thousand cubic yards. Beardsley says that original estimates for shipping the contaminated soil out of state for remediation was \$3.5 million; the additional material would have raised the cost to \$16 million, entirely outside of the project's budget.

The eventual solution? The contaminated soil was dug up, treated with a product that prevents lead from dispersing into water tables, and placed in a two-year stockpile. With the soil treated, it's technically non-hazardous, and the state could apply to store it in a one-time use monofill, "which is like a landfill for just one thing," Beardsley says. He says that Ahtna is currently designing the monofill. ⚙️

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