



Sick villagers wait for waste disposal

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The Pollution Control Committee will make a final decision next month on what to do with almost 3,000 tonnes of ore tailings which are suspected to have caused lead poisoning among residents of Lower Klity village in Kanchanaburi's Thong Pha Phum district.

The committee, chaired by the Natural Resources and Environment Ministry's permanent secretary Chote Trachoo, will choose between the two options on ore tailings management, according to Pollution Control Department chief Supat Wangwongwattana.

The first option is to transport the ore tailings from the old mining site to a privately-run hazardous waste management site in the neighbouring Ratchaburi province. The second option is to create a standard ore tailings storage site in the same place, he said.

Local mining company Lead Concentrate Co buried almost 3,000 tonnes of ore tailings from its mining venture, which closed in 1999. Tests of the water supply showed the ore had contaminated Klity Creek, causing many of the residents to fall ill.

The company buried the tailings at sites about 10 metres away from the creek, the main water source of the village's Karen ethnic residents.

Many villagers developed symptoms of lead poisoning.

Mr Supat said transporting the ore tailings to Ratchaburi province is the best solution to the prolonged lead-contamination problem in Klity Creek, while building ore storage facilities would take time and need a lot more funds.

The state would also have to take care of the site indefinitely to make sure no toxic substances are released into the environment.

The ore tailings are currently kept in eight holes. The department had an initial budget of nine million baht to remove half of the ore tailings, he said.

Mr Supat said his department would quickly implement the Pollution Control Committee's final decision on the ore tailings management.

Karen villagers at the Lower Klity village and environmentalists had been pressuring the department for several years to deal with the problem.

The department would also ask for the committee's approval on the construction of two dykes along Klity Creek to trap the lead-contaminated sediment. The construction would cost about seven million



baht and would be done by the Water Resources Department, Mr Supat said.

The creek is the main source of water for Klity villagers.

Surapong Kongchantuek, director of the Karen Studies and Development Centre, which is familiar with the Klity issue, supported the department's proposal for the removal of ore tailings from the area.

The department earlier disagreed with the idea to remove the ore tailings saying the lead concentration would reduce naturally.

"It seems that the department has realised that we can't wait for nature to heal itself," Mr Surapong said.

Eight villagers in 2003 filed a civil case against Lead Concentrate Co, demanding 119 million baht compensation for ailments allegedly caused by the company's mining operation. The court ruled in favour of the villagers and ordered the company to pay a total of 4.26 million baht to the plaintiffs. The Appeals Court in 2007 increased the compensation to 29.55 million baht. But none of the villagers received the compensation as the company has taken the case to the Supreme Court.

In another case, 22 Klity villagers filed an administrative case against the Pollution Control Department in 2004 for alleged negligence in dealing with the pollution caused by the mining operation. The court in 2008 ordered the department to pay 743,226 baht in compensation to the villagers, but the department appealed the case to the Supreme Administrative Court.